ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

JAN. 29 27

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The Mark of the Moccasin

A Mystery Tale

by Kenneth Perkins

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXXIII SATURDAY, JANUARY 29, 1927 NUMBER 5

The Mark of the Moccasin

A MYSTERY TALE

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Wild Paradise," "The Cañon of Light," etc.

PROLOGUE

"NEEDLESS to say, you'll be held without bail."

"That's easy enough to understand, sheriff."

The prisoner was a tall, spare man with dry, unkempt hair, which was the color of straw. Compared to the bull-necked, swarthy sheriff he seemed of a fine mold, despite his rather shabby clothes.

Age had shined his serge suit, and a week of sleeping in it had wrinkled it. He looked down and out, haggard. But I must not neglect to mention his eyes, which were gray, thoughtful, and as clear as steel.

"Would you like to question this hombre, Mr. Lerou?" the sheriff asked.

Lerou, district attorney, was a portly man with the eloquent gestures of a Louisiana Frenchman, and the broad-brimmed, two-gallon sombrero proper to the State of which he was now a citizen, Texas. The sheriff's office was crowded with men of his type.

"I hardly know where to begin, chief," he said.

The latter helped him out. "This bird was one of the nine who spent the week at Judge Scudder's manse down at Seven Bayous—"

"Nine? I thought you said there were only eight?" Mr. Lerou, the district attorney, objected.

"I was countin' Judge Scudder himself," the sheriff said, almost testily.

"The judge was murdered three weeks before, I thought you said."

The veins in the sheriff's bull neck swelled. He was definitely angry, not at the complacent Mr. Lerou, but at himself—or rather at the whole affair. He hated to be caught in so ridiculous a mistake, but he seemed to hate much more admitting he was at fault.

"The judge was murdered—and then again maybe he wasn't," the sheriff said. "Maybe he was drugged, and then went around—like he'd run amuck—killin' everybody."

"Preposterous!" Lerou exclaimed.

"Maybe—but we'll find out. Anyway, he's an important suspect. And I'm countin' him among the nine. Now, out of that bunch of folks, four of 'em was killed, one by one. This here hombre is one of the—well, the survivors."

The district attorney tilted his big sombrero, and wiped his forehead. "It is most extraordinary," he said. "You all sticking it out in that gloomy, dank house, while night after night a new victim was murdered. Four out of nine—sacre bleu!"

"The five that was left must all be kept in custody," said the sheriff.

"But, yes, I know that," Mr. Lerou rejoined. Evidently he was thinking about something else. He was studying the pale, thoughtful face of the unkempt prisoner. "Look here, Mr.—er—Mr.—"

"His name is Bostwick. Joe Bostwick. He's a teacher of a little combination high school and grade school down to Seven Bayous. Says that bein' a teacher he was a officer of the State." The bull-necked sheriff was chuckling at this grotesque idea. "A officer of the State—blah!"

"Is that why you stayed—to investigate?" a grand juror asked.

"Not entirely." The prisoner looked at the crowd. Seated on a chair within the balustrade that partitioned off the sheriff's private sanctum was a slim, dark-haired girl.

The district attorney followed the teacher's eyes. The girl was of a very high type of Creole beauty. You don't see many of them in Texas.

"She would not leave the house," the gray-eyed young man said.

"So *you* stayed," the district attorney added knowingly, sympathetically.

"That's one reason. Another was that I was held as if by a spell. Can you imagine, sir, what it meant to us all? We were on watch night after night, expecting at any time that one of us would be next. And one of us was always next, as sure as clockwork.

"There we were in that rotten old manse, which is hidden away by moss-hung oaks, and by the mists of that damned festering bayou. We couldn't leave. I might say we dared not. You know how the snake holds its victim's eye by fascinating it? That's how I was held there in that house."

"You will have to answer a powerful lot of questions, explainin' what you did every hour of the time," the sheriff ordained.

"I've answered them already," said the young teacher, Bostwick. "Look here." He pointed to a pile of closely written sheets. "I couldn't sleep. I declare I don't remember sleeping more than a fitful wink or two during the whole past week.

"I had to do something to keep from going crazy. So I wrote. I wrote by the hour night after night, vainly trying to put myself to sleep. You can take this document as a sort of report for your grand jury, Mr. Lerou."

The Cajun Texan, Lerou, looked askance at the pile of paper.

"He's addicted to writin'," said the sheriff more or less indulgently. "A teacher; writes for the papers a bit, he told me."

"This looks like the manuscript of a book," Lerou said doubtfully; then he added: "What kind of stuff do you write, young man, fiction, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Fact. Fact—that's all I've ever put my hand to. But I'll admit this report reads like fiction. It 'll make your hair stand on end. I wrote down everything—the possible motives of every one in the manse.

"I describe every one's actions to the fullest. Being addicted to writing, as the sheriff says, why, I just naturally let myself go. I tried to get it all straightened out on paper, because my mind couldn't grasp the details.

"Perhaps you understand that? Just as a business man might try to straighten out a tangle by getting all the pros and cons of a deal down on paper. And I'll say that once I got it down in black and white, the whole mystery seemed to clear up."

The attorney was impressed. He pulled his sombrero down again to shade his eyes from the fierce Texas sun streaming through the window. He then glanced quickly over a page, choosing it at random. The crowd was silent. There was only the buzzing of horse-flies against the window panes.

The page described the old manse and its

four queer inhabitants, the miserly old Judge Scudder, and his Creole daughter; a Mexican hostler, and a mulatto woman who was housekeeper. It was a picture of decay, of mystery. And its background was that bayou choked with purple lilies that enticed cattle to the brink, and then dragged them down to their death.

"You'll have to read fast to wade through all that truck," the sheriff said.

"It looks like the kind of stuff that makes fast reading," said the attorney.

He gathered the sheets together. "I'm goin' to look this stuff over, and when the jury meets to-night, I may know a little more about the case."

"You'll know everything about the case," said the young author.

"Meanwhile," the district attorney said, "You'd best hold all five of the—the survivors, I might call them—without bail."

"I'll do that, suh."

So Mr. Lerou retired and read the report written by Joe Bostwick, the school-teacher. And it is appended hereto.

CHAPTER I.

JUDGE SCUDDER.

SCHOOL term starts in a week. I got back to Seven Bayous from my vacation at Galveston on Sunday at about eight in the evening. I was in company with my very good friend, Tim Cronk, the photographer.

There was such a rainstorm that I decided not to ride out over the muddy roads to Mrs. Larraby's where I board. These equinox storms tear the whole landscape up. I've been caught making that trip before. For this reason Cronk and I put up at a little hotel, frequented by commercial travelers, the Lone-Star House.

It is a ramshackle frame building as bleak as a barn, and with long corridors dimly lighted by oil lamps. There is a lobby with innumerable cigar signs, the usual hotel desk which looked as if it had once been a bar, and a few card-tables.

The desk clerk, a bald man with unshaven white stubble and no collar, named Pennysmith—as I found out later—had just taken over the place.

In the dim light beyond an interminable space of ant-eaten pillars and swamp-grass floor mats and brass spittoons four drummers were playing whist.

Cronk and I sat in the lobby smoking Pennysmith's cheap cheroots. Cronk reading—purely by chance—a Gideon Bible; and I reading a Texas & New Orleans railway circular.

The wind was shrieking madly, and beyond the door, which, needless to say, was left wide open because of the heat, I could see the palmettos thrashing against a lurid background of sheet lightning on the flat horizon.

A bit of Spanish moss, torn from an oak, was swept in through the door. Crickets were making a frightful racket, and so were the frogs in the bayou out yonder behind the hotel corral. The pandemonium was a marked contrast to the utter inertness and depression of the card players, and old Pennysmith, and of my friend Cronk.

A man entered, but no one so much as looked up at him, no one, that is to say, except myself. The desk clerk, Pennysmith, was engaged in filling up a chewing gum slot machine.

I looked at the stranger; for I was tired reading my Texas & New Orleans circular. As a matter of fact, he was a very picturesque man. And once I saw him pass under a dim light, my gaze was riveted. Something was apparently wrong with him, though I could not for the life of me make out just what it was.

In the first place, he was without a hat, and his white hair was streaming wet. To be hatless was perhaps nothing very extraordinary, for no man could keep a hat on in that gale.

I thought at first that he was under the influence of liquor, for he walked with the exaggerated steadiness of a man who fears he will stagger.

He held his head—a fierce leonine sort of head with a mane of snow white hair that fell to his shoulders—he held it, I say, very erect and stiffly, an old soldier, perhaps; an old Southern "colonel."

His clothes were of broadcloth, elegant enough, but soaked to the skin with rain. I was of a mind to tell the desk clerk to get him some whisky. The storm seemed to have beaten him, whipped him, taken the residue of strength of aging years out of him.

But I did nothing. I was too perplexed in my endeavor to analyze just what was wrong with the old gentleman.

As I saw him walk across those swamp grass mats toward one of the card tables, his unnatural manner suggested that of a man walking in his sleep.

He sat down at the gaming table for which he had directed his steps in a fashion which had struck me as automatic, as if, for instance, he did not know the table was there, or at least did not see it.

Then, when he was seated, he slumped deep into the reed chair, and placed his arms on the table in an attitude of immeasurable weariness.

Again I was of a mind to call to the desk clerk to take care of this stranger. But again my gaze was riveted upon him; for he was doing a rather queer thing:

His thin, waxen, blue-veined hands were opening, and closing, and scooping in some imaginary chips across the baize top of the card table.

"Just plain locoed, that's all," I said to myself.

But I could not take my eyes off those hands. And I could not get the thought out of my mind that they were like a chicken's claws. You know how you can take a chicken leg, and pull at a certain tendon so that the claws spread out? That was what I was thinking of as I watched that man's hands!

He kept up this inane business even when he slumped deeper in his chair his head settling between his bent shoulders so that the silvery mane spread out over the broadcloth.

I was almost certain by this time that he was dazed, perhaps by exposure in the storm, perhaps by a too close proximity to where lightning had struck. Perhaps he had been hit on the head by a thug. There was a Negro settlement across the road, and there had recently been some little trouble between the Texas whites and the Negroes.

I reflected that a man in a daze—either from a blow or a drug or from whatsoever cause—is apt to engage automatically in some occupation which is habitual with him when in his normal senses.

Here was this old Southerner, very probably a gambler, who was in the habit of visiting this very hotel, sitting at that very table, drawing in chips from a poker game in that very manner.

All these thoughts flashed through my head rapidly; for the stranger had only been there a few brief moments. I want to make it clear that I did not sit there very long with the intention of doing nothing. I got up, and went to my friend, Cronk.

Cronk was absorbed in reading his Gideon's Bible. I believe he had never opened a Bible before, and he seemed to be experiencing the thrill common to any one first looking into that Book. He told me later that he was reading about Lazarus.

But I must stick to the main thread of this chronicle.

"You see that old duffer over there?" I asked. "Don't look now. He's behind your shoulder, sitting at a card table."

Cronk waited; then casually turned his head.

By that time, the old man had got to his feet—not without difficulty—and he was now walking to a door very near his table, the door to a room where they sold soft drinks.

I could see into this room, and across it to a door that led out into the open. The man did not pause at any of the marble-top tables, but kept on, and went out into the slashing rain.

Cronk was staring hard, but he did not evince any extraordinary surprise. Indeed, the symptoms I had noticed were not so apparent now—mainly because the light was quite dim over there. Another reason for the change flashed through my mind: assuming that he had been walking in his sleep, he might now be on the verge of waking.

Then again, assuming that he might have been dazed, the few moments of sitting at that table might have given him time enough to recuperate. Of course, I don't mean that he was normal all of a sudden. A man comes out of a daze slowly. But there might have been just enough of a change to affect his waking.

At any rate, Cronk's only remark was to

grunt: "A little too much of Pennysmith's rot-gut."

"He hasn't been here long enough. Just came in. And then went out."

"Pennysmith's not the only one who sells the stuff."

I couldn't deny I had been illogical.

"Got a bottle from those burr-heads across the street," Cronk added.

"He was drugged," I said—rather uncertainly.

"Sweet Lucy is worse than a drug," Cronk rejoined.

In any event he should not be allowed to wander out in this hurricane," I said. Accordingly, I hurried into the soft drink room, a dismal place with a plate glass window, innumerable signs, and a ramshackle soda fountain. I went to the door beyond, and looked out into the storm.

A flash of lightning revealed the lonely road, a few gaunt houses screened by tossing palmettos, or cypress, an expanse of cane-brake, and a row of Negro hovels.

The landscape was devoid of any human being. Evidently the poor old wanderer had branched off to some side lane, or else stumbled into the thicket. Perhaps, on the other hand, he had gone through that oak grove under the streaming pendants of Spanish moss to get some more sweet Lucy at one of the Negro huts.

That at least was a less unpleasant idea than others that entered my head.

"You aren't going out into that storm to hunt around in the cane-brake for a drunk?" Cronk said to me.

I went back into the lobby, definitely resolved that I would tell old Pennysmith about his visitor, and suggest that some of us go out in the storm, and look for him. There was a bayou near by, a veritable swamp, and it would be a bad place for an intoxicated man or any kind of man, to be staggering around.

And as I returned to the comparatively pleasant dankness of the big room, I heard one of the drummers at the card table turn, and call out to Pennysmith:

"Wasn't that thar man who just come in and went out, Judge Scudder?"

The bald little man shrugged his shoulders. "Never heard of Judge Scudder."

"Nobody's heard of him for the past five years," said the drummer out of the corner of his mouth, which did not hold the cigar stub. "He's buried himself in that old manse of his down the bayou. Never goes out, stays there with his daughter, and a housekeeper, and an old Mex mozo. A miser. Used to come here a lot in the old days before your time."

"Never saw Judge Scudder," the desk clerk repeated. "But this fellow that just come in, well, I seen him. And I seen that he was kind of under the influence of liquor—and had lost his hat. Well, I was glad he got up and beat it. Don't like drunks around this joint. The revenue officers keep too close a tab on me."

"I know Judge Scudder," another man at the table said, "but this man wasn't him."

"Did you see him?" I asked, observing that the player who had just spoken had had his back to the whole scene.

"No. But I happen to know it waren't Judge Scudder."

This remark was rather challenging to us all, and one of the men, who was at that moment dealing the cards, remarked: "He had a long white mop of hair, streaming wet over his black coat. Likewise he had a white goatee, and long wet mustache. I remember Judge Scudder had a hawk nose. And you couldn't forget his hands—"

"No. I'll never forget his hands," I chimed in. "They were like claws."

The player who had been so all-fired certain that it wasn't Judge Scudder, turned around and looked at me. Then he grinned.

"It waren't Judge Scudder," he said, turning back to the table and picking up the cards that had been dealt him.

I flushed hot, as if he had called me a liar—although it wasn't I who had said that it was the judge.

"That kind of settles it, from the tone of voice you're using," I said.

"Yep. It settles it."

"Well, I'll be caterwopously damned!" I exploded.

And then one of the others saved us from further altercation by announcing calmly:

"Mr. Johnson here happens to be right."

Cronk, and I, and the desk clerk, as well as the other two players, stared.

"How come?" one of them said.

"Because it so happens that the judge has been dead three weeks."

This put a very effectual end to the argument. Pennysmith made his customary gesture of shrugging his shoulders, and then returned to monkey with his chewing gum slot machine. Cronk returned to his peculiar interest, the Gospel of Luke. The four drummers played at cards.

I stood in the middle of the room.

The black windows of the old shack turned a ghastly bluish white in the lightning's flashes every now and then, revealing the silhouette of restless palmettos and hulks of black that were the oaks sending out streamers of Spanish moss. Out there in the screeching wind, there was an old man with a sopping wet mane, a hawk nose, bleary eyes, an old man walking as if in a trance.

I turned to my friend, Tim Cronk.

"Have you finished the story of the raising of Lazarus?" I asked.

He looked up quickly, startled. His face, I noticed, went white.

CHAPTER II.

BEAUTY FROM THE BLACKNESS.

TIM CRONK was a very peculiar fellow. I had got to know him quite well during the few weeks I had spent in Galveston. He had come from Seven Bayous to spend the summer down there at the seashore where he kept a photographer's shop.

He also sold curios, painted seashells, plaster saints, stuffed sea birds, and Navaho blankets in the front end of his store. He was always casting about for new ways of making money, and I must say he had imagination.

The only trouble is he was extravagant and impractical. A funny little bird of a man with an engaging smile, reticent, bashful, thin-haired and with a bulging forehead, he looked like a philosopher and a savant.

But he was anything but that. He did have a habit of picking up books and dabbling in them, but he never read one through. Nor did he read the newspapers.

This latter deficiency was not peculiar to Tim Cronk alone. It was one of my own shortcomings. I don't believe we read a newspaper all the time we were at Galveston. Otherwise we might have seen a notice of the death of one of the rich men of our own town; I mean Judge Scudder.

Judge Scudder's name was well known to me, although I had never seen him. I knew where his old manse was; and every time I passed it I was intrigued with the air of gloomy mystery that hung about the place. You understand that since my coming to Seven Bayous to teach in their school, Judge Scudder had gone into his hermit-like retirement. Not a soul, except those of his household, had seen him for five years.

I must qualify that last statement. There was a cottonseed oil mill adjoining the judge's estate, and the mill workers, passing the adobe wall in back of his house, caught glimpses of the white-haired man now and then sitting out in the patio among his rubber plants and magnolias. What I mean to say is that no one had ever seen him outside of his own gloomy domain.

Of course, Tim Cronk and I would have evinced no interest in his death even if we had chanced to read of it in a paper three weeks before this, when we were both down at the seashore.

But on that night at the Lone-Star Hotel, we both evinced a very vital interest. The fact that a man with all the symptoms of a sleepwalker had entered that hotel lobby, and had been recognized as Judge Scudder, and the announcement that the judge had been dead for three weeks, this combination was like a thunderbolt. It shattered our nerves.

I dare say I was as flabbergasted, and perhaps horror-stricken, as poor Tim Cronk; any man would have been who had any imagination. Tim Cronk, I have neglected to say, was very much interested in spiritualism.

Like many people who are semilearned, whose brains are active but untrained, Cronk jumped avidly to any manifestation

that could not be explained in natural terms. The fact that it could not be explained meant indubitably that it was a manifestation of spirits.

It is odd that in this day of advanced civilization and science in a locality like Seven Bayous, where there are telegraph wires, steamboats on the ship channel, mills in full blast, trains roaring past on the Houston and Sabine, the La Porte Houston and Northern, the Texas and New Orleans railroads, it is strange, I say, that any man can believe the spirits of the dead hover about us, rap on tables, walk into the same room with us, and return to the bodies which housed them in life.

But Tim Cronk, the photographer, certainly believes in this sinister faith, and for that matter I myself had ample reasons to believe likewise before another day had passed.

Cronk focused his apprehensive, China blue eyes on the group of card players at the table, and said in a queer, tight voice:

"Is the judge actually dead, or is it only a rumor?"

"What do you mean, rumor?" one of the men said.

"I mean what I say, some bit of gossip spread around by the Negroes down on Seven Bayous, or by the mill workers, or Mexicans."

"It may be a rumor started by Mexes or negroes," a card player conceded almost flippantly. "But I seen it announced in the papers."

"And I seen the funeral," said another. "They was a fine-lookin' hearse, and then come a cab, and then a buggy. In the buggy was a octoroon gal, and an old Mex who they say used to be the hostler for their racin' stables in the good ole days. In the cab there was a brunette gal of about nineteen, I figure—"

"The judge's daughter—I mean stepdaughter," said another player.

"Whoever she was I don't know," said the other, "but leastwise she was the prettiest thing I ever did see."

Cronk and I looked at each other. A funeral, of course, did not prove anything; that is, not conclusively. I was going to ask if this witness had seen a coffin. But that would have been ridiculous. Of course there was a coffin. And of course there was a funeral. For that matter I had no doubt whatever but that there was also a corpus delicti.

But Cronk was the one who had nerve enough to ask a question which betrayed just what was in our minds:

"What was the coroner's verdict?"

The men looked around. It was not so much the question—which, after all, was quite a natural one—but it was the tone in which the words had been spoken.

"Are you doubtin' there was a coroner?" a burly drummer in a sack suit with diamond pin, gold fountain pen, and rings on his fingers, asked.

Cronk stammered. "Not exactly. But they're queer folks over there at Scudder's."

"Well, there was a coroner," the same drummer said, almost belligerently. "And it was ole Doc Zobel." That was equivalent to saying it was not only a coroner, but a very honest one.

"What was his verdict?" I asked.

"That the deceased had a fever, same as these swamp folks call the 'breakbone.'"

One of the other players put in, evidently with a mischievous attempt at keeping the peculiar argument going, "Did the coroner say that the de-ceased was daid?"

"Reckon there wouldn't of been a funeral if he waren't," said some one else.

"I don't know about that," I said.

It was my turn to be stared at.

One of the players blurted out, "You still think that was Judge Scudder, even though you never seen him before!" He might have come right out with the announcement that he thought I was an idiot. His tone of voice at least suggested this conviction.

"What-all are you driving at, mister, anyway?" I think two or three asked this, including old Pennysmith, who had joined the group.

Of course I did not answer. In the first place I wasn't driving at anything. I was trying hard enough, Heaven knows, to drive at something, but I didn't know how to begin.

Thoughts were racing through my mind. I had a peculiar conviction—it was, you might say, intuitive—that this Judge Scudder had been murdered. No, not murdered, but that an attempt had been made upon his life, which had failed.

Premature burial was one thing that took hold of me like an obsession. That man had been lying in a grave—or, I must not neglect to specify, a vault.

In Louisiana, as you know, they bury their dead in vaults, called "ovens," at a height of two or three feet above the ground. In this part of Texas some of the Louisiana French had retained the custom, particularly near the Louisiana border, due to the natural reason for this sort of burial, —the swampy ground.

There were a few of those Louisiana sepulchers in Seven Bayous, and I had no doubt but that Judge Scudder, who had married a Louisiana Creole, was buried in that manner.

The picture that engraved itself in my mind, as I evoked the figure of that white-maned man wandering in from the storm, was of a man escaped from a vault. It was hideous, the very thought of it.

But that made it all the more unforgetable. Besides, it seemed to explain everything: his manner of walking, his rumpled clothes—which were evidently the best he had worn in life—and the fact that he was without a hat.

An attempt at murder, a premature burial, there was the combination that explained everything, and I clung to it doggedly, like a devotee finding a new faith.

And there was my friend, Tim Cronk, another devotee, to another and less rational faith. He was still ghastly. I turned to him and said: "Take a drink, Tim."

He said nothing. He was staring out at the lurid flashes of light on the horizon beyond the palmettos of the corral.

"What's the matter?" I asked under my breath.

He replied in a whisper. Luckily he did not want those strangers to hear him. They were drummers and practical men, despite the fact that they had an unlimited talent in thinking up stories and lies, and believing them.

"Matter enough," he said almost voicelessly. "*A ghost came in here and walked out!* That's what's the matter."

I asked the desk clerk if there was any chance of getting a cup of coffee. No, there was not; the cook had retired. I argued that my friend was very much under the weather, and it was a matter of vital importance. Old Pennysmith shrugged his shoulders and smiled affably. He couldn't quite see that it was any fault of his that the cook had retired.

"Then I'll ask another favor. Have you saved any old newspapers? I want to look through an edition of about three weeks ago."

"You'll find a pile of old papers in the wood shed, which is next to the kitchen," he said. "And you kin b'ile yourself some coffee."

I went out there with Cronk.

"The judge they're talking about is some other judge," I said. "These traveling salesmen, you know, are very inaccurate."

While Cronk heated water in a trembling, uncertain fashion, I rummaged through the pile of discarded papers until I found, luckily enough, the remains of one which had the date I wanted.

As this was a Houston paper, published at some distance from Seven Bayous, the death of the judge was given only a minimum of space:

> Brutus A. Scudder died at his estate at Seven Bayous last night. Dr. Zobel, of San Fernando, deputy coroner, pronounced the death due to an enteric fever, the result of a trip to Nicaragua many years before.
>
> Judge Scudder's fortune, which is alleged to comprise many varied investments in the cattle industry as well as in flaxseed products, perique tobacco, oil, and sulphur, is left to his stepdaughter, and his two household servants.
>
> Brutus A. Scudder was for ten years judge of the circuit court. When he came to Texas from Louisiana he was reputed to have been the richest man in Calcasieu Parish. His wife, Jeanne Scudder, was of an old Creole family, of Evangeline Parish, Louisiana. The judge is survived by one relative, his stepdaughter, Shirley Scudder.

"Evidently these drummers weren't so inaccurate as you figured," Cronk said.

"All right, we've got one thing settled;

Judge Scudder is dead. And now the only problem to solve is, just who was that man with the white hair?"

"Scudder's ghost."

"Before believing that, why not exhaust all other possibilities?" I said exasperatedly.

"There are no other possibilities," Cronk said. The little fellow was quite obviously hysterical. "It was a ghost—a materialized spirit; that's the right name. Didn't you see how he walked? Didn't he seem unreal? No sound, no tracks left, as any man sopping wet would make walking across those swamp grass mats. He just appeared, and then vanished out there. You saw no sign of him out there, did you? Hadn't he vanished?"

He had, I could not help admitting. As for the tracks of muddy feet and streaming wet clothes, I confess I had not noticed any that could be definitely attributed to the old wanderer. The floor of Pennysmith's lobby was already dirtied with tracks, so that point was inconsequential.

But there was the indubitable point, the walk; it was not a natural gait. Judge Scudder might have had a double, but that did not explain the walk.

"We'll go back and hunt for the tracks," I said. "But, mind you, the lobby is hot, and the drafts like gales. Dripped water wouldn't last long on that floor. It would be sopped up by the mats, or else turned to steam."

We finished our coffee in silence. Cronk seemed afraid to go back. I had to urge him several times, but each time he poured himself another cup, and sipped slowly, his eyes staring, dilating as if the caffeine were actually drugging him.

I got up presently and went into the lobby, knowing he would follow me. He was too much ridden by fear to stay alone in a room, even in that harmless, necessary, prosaic kitchen.

Cronk was right about the tracks. A man with boots that must have been covered with adobe mud, and with clothes that had obviously been dripping wet, had appeared on that floor, and then vanished, leaving no sign of his visitation.

I even examined the table where he had sat. The green baize top had sopped up the water from his dripping arms. It was damp, but so was everything else.

"It was granted to us, tired and nervous from traveling through the storm, to see this materialization," Cronk said. "Some of those drummers didn't even see him. That's the way at a séance. Some have the 'sight'; others are blind."

I argued that the players were engrossed with their whist. But it sounded lame.

The players, I must not neglect to say, had by this time retired. Old Pennysmith, with a green eye shade masking all but the shining, sweating forehead, and white whiskered jowls, was now seated behind his desk, nodding.

He was awakened by the entrance of some one who, I naturally surmised, was a guest seeking shelter from the storm, and lodging for the night.

The storm, as a matter of fact, had abated considerably. There were still flashes of lightning—lurid sheet lightning that played with a distant drumming of thunder on the horizon. The swamp palmettos still tossed, silhouetting themselves against this light.

The frogs kept up a loud, almost deafening croaking. The gale went into a depressing diminuendo, a wailing series of harmonies in a minor key.

If we had been theatrical people, with a constant appreciation for dramatic entrances, we could not have been more satisfied with any first entrance of a character on a stage than the entrance of this person—a woman. The softer harmonies of the storm seemed to have been composed as a special motif. You would expect to hear it played recurrently every time she made her appearance.

She was a little taller than the usual height of a woman; slim and graceful, despite the fact that her shoulders were drooping with fatigue. She wore some sort of rubber slicker that was quite out of style, as far as I could judge these matters.

And yet she suggested something regal. I could not help thinking that here was some one of high estate traveling in this wretched hovel of a wayside hotel incognito.

There was a jeweled comb gleaming underneath the wet, shapeless brim of her hat, as if buried and smoldering in the black ashes of her hair.

Then I saw her face. It was pale. Her finely sculptured, ashen lips parted with her tumultuous gasping for breath. The jet black hair streamed in wet wisps down her white forehead and fragile temples. And out of this almost deathlike mask there gleamed two beautiful dark eyes, a blaze of living light, as marked a contrast to her face as the jewels of her comb were to her wet hair.

The ugly runt, Pennysmith, came to with a start at seeing this vision. She spoke to him hurriedly, her breast heaving, her hands clutching the edge of the desk. I could not hear what she said. But I heard Pennysmith.

He was a lazy, unobliging rascal.

"I cain't very well leave this house, ma'am. They'll be other guests comin', and I got to take care of 'em. I'd advise you to stay here overnight. A young lady like you shouldn't ought to be out in this kind of weather."

By this speech I understood that she had asked him to go out on some errand or other, and that he refused.

She spoke to him again, her delicate knuckles whitening as she clutched the desk. Her voice was raised, so that I heard a word or two:

"You've got to—I've got to have help—I've got to get back—"

Then I saw Pennysmith's detestable sweating shoulders shrug again, which was his own Pilate-like gesture of washing his hands of everybody's troubles but his own.

Needless to say, I got up and went to the desk—even though Cronk, who was watching this scene, plucked my arm.

"Can I help?" I said.

She turned to me. I was impressed by the velvet beauty of that skin. It was the rich olive color of the Spanish or French you find in Louisiana. It was beautiful, despite the fact that it was drained of blood, and that the lips were gray.

"Sure you kin help," the desk clerk said. "Might you know this young lady? She's from down your way — Seven Bayous." He looked down at the ragged old register to see if he had my name right. Then: "Meet Mr. Bostwick, ma'am. This is Miss Scudder—Judge Scudder's daughter."

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE TOMB.

BEFORE this adventure, Cronk and I had had a conversation which at the time had seemed ludicrous. But now it took on a different aspect.

Cronk had read in one of the bulletins of his Psychic Research Society that a certain very rich man had advertised his desire to see a *bona-fide* spirit. He was, I judge, a skeptical type of person, obsessed, however, with the more theatrical element of spiritualism.

He offered a prize of ten thousand dollars to the first man who could, in the presence of reputable witnesses, evoke a "materialized spirit" from the dead.

A materialized spirit, Cronk explained to me, was the ghost of a dead man, which could be discovered and recognized by the human eye.

"I'm going to get that ten thousand dollars," Cronk said to me after our strange experience at the Lone Star Hotel.

I did not see exactly how he would go about claiming the prize. He could write a report that he had seen a ghost, but that would scarcely be sufficient. The terms of the old crank who was offering the ten thousand, stated explicitly that he himself must see the materialized ghost, and that it must be the spirit of some one known to have been dead — "officially pronounced dead," you might say.

"You'll have to find this ghost again," I said rather lightly, "and show him to this millionaire crank."

"That may not be so impossible," Cronk rejoined.

Indeed, now that this girl, the judge's daughter, had turned up, we both felt that before the evening was over we would see, or at least hear, something more about the dead Judge Scudder.

Cronk and I both went out into the storm with the girl.

The tempest was dragging itself out. There is a part of these West Indies hurricanes which people of the Gulf States—I mean especially those whose vocabularies are enriched by certain Cajun terms—call the revanche.

At this time the hurricane tide, which has swept inland, recedes, and takes with it a heavy toll of destroyed plantation huts, dead cattle, wounded gulls, and perhaps a few unlucky shrimpers who have been caught in their luggers or pirogues.

The revanche was going on now to an obligato of subdued gales. Roads were gutted arroyos churning with brown water; the bayous were a mass of torn and writhing hyacinths; palmettos were decapitated; farther down, beyond the swamp prairies, where the sea marshes began, mud lumps were being swept to the Gulf; new islands were being born.

My connection with the tragedy of the Scudder manse commenced in this manner.

Shirley Scudder merely wanted a man to help her with her horse and buggy. Blinded by the storm, she had wandered a bit from the road, and the buggy wheels had sunk up to their hubs in a morass of tules and mud.

Cronk and I went out with a lantern, and with the aid of the nag we struggled to get the buggy back to the road.

The girl stood apart on the roadside, a frail, lonely figure, her skirts and wisps of her hair tossed by the strong hot wind.

"Look here, Tim. You're thinking what I'm thinking. She's been riding around in this hurricane for a pretty good reason. And that reason is Judge Scudder. In other words, the old judge is not dead.

"Now wait. Don't argue that point. You think he's a ghost. Well, there are no ghosts. He was either the judge, or his double. The girl was searching for him. Now, what does that mean?"

"It means a thousand things," he said, almost loud enough for her to hear.

"Quiet, now—and get this: It means that that funeral and that death were a fake. He's alive. If they buried anybody they buried some one else—and announced that it was the judge. Perhaps the judge himself committed a murder—who knows?"

"His walk—" Tim Cronk reminded me in a voice that had the tone both of conviction and perplexity.

"Perhaps he was crazy—and they keep him prisoner there," I suggested.

It was an inspiration. It was the one key that seemed to unlock everything. Consider this tentative combination of circumstances; some one wanted the judge's fortune. The judge for several years has been, we'll say, insane. He is kept under cover in his big manse and estate.

Then some one dies—who, perhaps, is about his age, and may resemble him. The dead man, properly passed on by a coroner, is buried as the judge! Conclusion: The conspirators get the fortune!

I said no more, for we had gotten the buggy back to the road, and the girl came to us.

I advised her not to attempt the road to Seven Bayous, but she would not listen. As a matter of fact, she announced to my astonishment that she had started from the Scudder manse an hour or so before, when the gale was blowing at its height. To return now seemed to her a very simple matter.

Not too simple, I pointed out, inasmuch as those rickety little bridges might have been standing before the time of the revanche, but it was right now when it was most dangerous to cross them.

Still she was obdurate. She had to go back.

"If it is possible for a young lady to brave this weather and make the trip to Seven Bayous, it is possible for me," I said. "I would like very much to accompany you—and help you in case you lose the road again."

She put her hand on my arm. I think she actually gripped it. "I can't ever thank you enough," she said. "I can't dare to think of making that trip alone—back to that house—"

"What house?" I blurted out in surprise.

"I mean my home," she said. "I was wishing desperately to have some one with me. You could see plainly I'm unstrung.

Yes? You admit that? Well, I want some one riding with me—if it's only some one to talk to. I'm afraid. I mean I'm afraid of that ride."

Something flashed through my mind which made me interpret her words: "She wasn't so much afraid of the ride, as of going back to 'that house.'"

Cronk heard all this. He listened hungrily. I could not quite picture him following us out to the Scudder manse. He believed implicitly in haunted houses. He believed beyond any shadow of a doubt that old Judge Scudder's ghost would be haunting that manse. What was my surprise, therefore, when he announced:

"I'm coming out to the Scudder manse."

I plucked him by the sleeve, and we stepped aside where the girl could not hear us.

"You forget this business. It won't do you any good; it might do you some dreadful harm—your nerves, you know."

"I won't let you get mixed up in this affair alone," he replied. "I'm going to stick by you."

"Confound it all! There's not room for three in this buggy."

"Very well, I'll follow."

"Just why are you so anxious to get mixed up in what looks like a crime?"

"I want to earn ten thousand dollars," he said simply.

That was just like Cronk. His brain was in some ways the brain of a child; it would jump from the fear of ghosts to curiosity about crime—and then abruptly to some scheme of making money!

"How in the world can you make ten thousand out of this?"

"The reward for proving that there is life after death," he said.

Utterly out of patience, I turned my back on him. "Good night." I rejoined the girl, climbed into the buggy, and took the reins.

As we started our ride, I was beset by many conflicting emotions. My hypothesis of a demented man escaped from imprisonment had untangled a pretty complex knot of circumstances; it had explained the strange walk, the manner of playing at imaginary cards; it explained the girl's frantic desire to find him, coming out alone in that storm to do so.

It explained the death notice, the burial; and for that matter, it even explained the coroner's verdict, once you looked into the various possibilities: the coroner, for instance, could have been a stranger to the judge, and hence was easily hoodwinked. On the other hand, he might have been a friend of the family—and a conniver in the plot.

There was, however, one thing that upset my whole hypothesis as if it had been a house of cards: I mean the girl herself.

As I rode by her side out onto the swamp prairies beyond which lay Seven Bayous, I was convinced that she could have had no knowledge, at least no part, in any crime.

I was impressed, absolutely enchanted with her. I constantly had the peculiar illusion that I was riding with an angel who was beset on all sides with hideous devils. At times a flash of lightning illumined her face.

Despite the fact that she was tortured with many misgivings that I could not at that time fathom, her face was radiant. The gleams of sheet lightning played upon it like dim starlight on a garden pool.

She sat there, her shoulder against mine, her hands kneading each other nervously, frantically. Her occasional sighs were moans. She was in a desperate mental plight; there was little doubt about that.

I was driving the nag, and for some time I occupied my whirling brain, luckily, with the attempt to keep to the shell road. It was not difficult after I "got my eyes," as the road was a white glare—like a trail of phosphorescence, winding off between interminable flats of tules, cane brakes, palmettos, moss-hung oaks.

Except for bunches of cattle huddled together like forlorn ghosts looming in some stretch of prairie, the world was deserted.

Finally, my mind was freed from the meticulous watching of the road, and it turned again to the "visitation" of the judge, and the arrival of the girl, and my approach to the old manse down on the seaward side of Seven Bayous.

"You said you wanted some one to talk to," I suggested.

It would take more than this to get her to tell a word about the tragedy that was distracting her mind.

You might at first think that I was presumptuous in thinking that she would say anything to me, a comparative stranger. But I was convinced of the fact that she could not, under any stretch of the imagination, have had anything to do with the crime, if a crime had been committed.

For that reason I could not quite see why she could keep an impregnable silence. On the contrary, I was of the opinion that she really wanted some one to talk to, to unburden her unhappy thoughts to.

To that end I talked for awhile about myself. I talked of the little school in Seven Bayous. A teacher is considered a personage in the community not without a modicum of respectability.

He may be poor, he may be shabby, he may have no family connections, but he is important. And he is well known. This girl, in fact, knew me not only by name, but she said she had seen me once or twice at the town hall when I was delivering a speech on some local political issue.

After this preliminary talk I ventured boldly: "You said something about being afraid to return to your house."

"The road is lonely," she said. "I have never traveled it without some one accompanying me—except to-night."

But this was only sidestepping the truth. I remembered she had definitely referred to her house, and had then corrected herself by explaining that it was the journey to her house which had made her afraid.

My silence was practically a statement of my doubt. So she went on to explain:

"I am afraid of going back to the house. I have been afraid of living there ever since my step-father died. There is only our housekeeper, a rather worthless young woman, and an old Mexican hostler.

"I doubt if any one would ever enter the house—despite the fact it is known there is no one there who could put up much resistance against robbers."

"I am not afraid of robbers."

There was a pregnant statement. She was afraid. But of what?

I observed that moment by moment she was groping along, sounding me as a skipper approaching a shore before making his landing. And moment by moment as she measured my depth, she steered in closer, ready at almost any moment, I thought and hoped, to take me into her confidence.

But this she would not do. "Just what are you afraid of, mam'selle?" I asked.

"I can't tell *you*," she said. "I wouldn't for the world. And I don't know what it is anyway."

She added to this statement, after we had covered a lot of road, passing a ranch, crossing the first bayou, and the wooded space of moss-hung oaks, acacias, swamp palmettos beyond.

The lightning was smoldering. The sky purified by the tempest was suddenly ablaze with stars. There was the strong smell of brackish water, of rotting lilies, of stagnant swamps.

Then the girl said:

"You'd better not try to go to your lodging—Mrs. Larraby's farm is it? There is a bad one to cross, it is a long walk, and you won't be able to get a horse. I shall need this buggy early in the morning. I wonder if you wouldn't find it convenient to have us put you up?"

I knew perfectly well what this meant. She might have said: "I'm afraid to stay in my manse with that housekeeper, and that Mexican hostler. I want a strong man—a respected man—to guard over me."

Needless to say, I accepted the invitation scarcely without the obligatory suggestion that I might be a nuisance descending upon her household at such an hour.

We reached the house during the revanche of the storm. And it is in one of the massive, gloomy, bedchambers of the ancient manse that I am writing these very lines.

It is easy enough for you to understand that I have been unable to sleep. The air of these Gulf hurricanes makes every one nervous. Added to that the events that I've recorded thus far have upset me, not to mention the shock that I have received by one other event, which I have not yet recorded.

That is why that, when I found an old escritoire in one corner of the room, and a

pile of foolscap, I decided to calm myself, and make myself physically exhausted by writing. Beside this motive, I reflected that if I put down all the events immediately after their occurrence, the chronicle would be valuable.

Our senses are unbelievably imperfect. We see an event, and then a subsequent adventure blurs the exact memory. But here I am writing almost immediately after the adventures of the evening have occurred.

Right now there is a lull. I myself am waiting for Cronk and the deputy sheriff to arrive. The girl is somewhere in the cavernous depths of the old manse, probably lying in one of the massive canopied beds such as the one here in my room.

She is waiting for the coming of the coroner, a certain Dr. Zobel. Since I bade her good night under the dim flickering of the candles in a wrought iron sconce down there in the hall, I have discovered just why she rode into the storm; it was to get the coroner!

That makes things look rather sinister. It appears that Dr. Zobel is an old friend of the family. Something happened in this house in the earlier part of the evening; and then, despite the terrific storm, the girl rode out over the swamp prairies—a considerable distance—in search of the old family doctor!

What that means, I don't know. I have had a lot of hypothetical explanations whirling through my brain, but at present I have no time to write about hypothetical matters. I shall write only about actual occurrences.

Outside, beyond the filigreed gallery of my window, I observe that there is an uncanny darkness in the sky, darkness that seems to blot out the stars like a canopy. It is the darkness that precedes morning.

So I must hurry:

It is a large house in a grove of moss-hung oaks. Yonder through my window, I see a stretch of black water spotted with large masses of hyacinths that the storm has torn from their moorings.

Far beyond that black water there are sea marshes, and the Gulf of Mexico. The house itself is a mass of adobe, and stone, and wrought iron galleries and verandas. In the patio, I see palmettos, and rubber plants.

When I came in, it was like entering a vault, dank, almost pitch dark, musty, with drafts that moaned through ant-eaten shutters. By the sconce—which I have already mentioned—I saw a staircase going into the realms of darkness above. The last I have seen of the girl was when, a few hours ago, she mounted that staircase, passing full-length portraits of her French ancestors.

I was left below in company with the housekeeper.

A drink of rare sherry, amanzanilla, helped my spirits somewhat, and I waited for the housekeeper to get the change of linen and mosquito bairé for my room. Then she preceded me up the grand staircase, carrying a candelabrum of hammered iron.

I watched her as she fixed the bed. She was a lithe, tall octoroon, with the movements of a puma lioness. Her face was thin, swarthy, and her two eyes, rather narrow set and slanting, were of hard black, with a sheen of greenish fire. It reminded me of the gloss you might find on mica.

When she got through arranging my bed, she turned on me with a suddenness that took my breath away.

"She went after the doctor," the woman said in a low excited voice. "How is it she brought you?"

"What doctor?" I said.

"Dr. Zobel."

I immediately recognized the name of the coroner, which I had read not so very long before in that newspaper announcement of Judge Scudder's death.

"I offered to ride with her to Seven Bayous because of the storm," I explained. "Then when we reached here, she invited me to stay; the road to my lodgings across the bayou is dangerous."

"Nom de Dieu!" the woman exclaimed. "A good excuse."

I did not offer to comment on this. I merely waited while she burned into me with her eyes.

"You're the schoolmaster," she said.

I nodded.

"And she brought *you* here! It is to laugh. Par foi. How long has she known you, monsieur; perhaps that is not a secret that you'll hold from me?"

"Certainly not!" I rejoined with the definite motive of getting her into my confidence. "I never saw her until to-night. She had seen me perhaps once or twice—giving a speech. But we never met until to-night—back there at the Lone-Star Hotel. She wanted some one to get her horse and buggy out of the mud."

The woman laughed at this, showing beautiful, flashing teeth.

"And she would invite any man—from a cheap drummer's hotel, a gambler's posada—to come here. Sacré bleu, but how crazy that little wench has become!"

I had noticed on my first entrance that when these two women met, they faced each other like two beasts. Any man would have seen what I saw—a fierce elemental hatred between them.

"A Creole lady, she is—eh? A lady who looks down on me as a servant. I'm something more than a servant in this house; I'll have you understand that, monsieur, if you're to be a guest here."

"I can tell a servant, ma'am, when I see one."

The gentle bit of flattery did not move her. "Here we have had no guest in this house for many years, except that old grotesque doctor. And now she is so beside herself, she invites the first man she meets—"

"I'm sorry if I've caused you all this trouble, coming here at this time of night."

Her attitude seemed to change abruptly. I could never understand it. I could never understand anything she did except by reflecting that her one motive was to act in cross purposes with her mistress. If her mistress had got me into that house as a spy, why then this housekeeper would frustrate the game, by taking me into her confidence. *She* would use me as a spy likewise.

"Do you know why you were invited to stop here?" she asked in a low voice.

"Miss Shirley Scudder was afraid," I repeated, "that I would not be able to get home safely."

"Nonsense. She's afraid—yes. But not of your safety. Of her own."

I believed that so implicitly that I did not contradict the woman.

"What has happened in this house?" I asked with ill-considered abruptness.

"Oh, so you know something has happened?"

"You said Miss Scudder went out for the doctor. It must have been serious, considering the weather."

"All right, I'll tell you. I'll hold no secrets. She ordered me not to tell. That's why I *will* tell."

There were the cross purposes again. And this time it explained something which certainly needed explanation.

The woman had softened. She had turned from a strong-limbed, lithe, powerful animal like a puma, into a frightened, hounded thing.

"It is something that I can't believe," she said. "No one will believe. And yet every one must know."

She was shaking now. A sort of fit had taken hold of her. I urged her to sit down.

"Why shall I keep it a secret?" she went on, taking a new lease of savage life. The fit seemed like a fit of intense hunger, the kind of hunger that gnaws at your vitals and drains your face of blood and makes you shudder. "If I keep it secret, I'll get into trouble.

"Our old mozo—the only servant on this plantation—he'll get into trouble, too. She doesn't care. All for the sake of a blotch on the name, she wants us to live here, nursing in secret something that must be a crime, or else something that is the work of the devils of hell."

"Tell me," I urged gently.

She looked at me fiercely. But there was no doubt in her eyes. She seemed to care little whether I was an officer of the law, or a detective hired by her mistress, or that I was merely a stranger staying there overnight, because the road to my own lodgings was too dangerous to attempt. In any case, the affair was not to be kept a secret—not if she could help it.

"Judge Scudder died three weeks ago," she said.

I admitted I knew this.

"He was buried. Out there in an old cemetery, in a vault."

A peculiar current gripped me. If he had been buried in a grave the misgivings that no amount of rational reflection had been able to quell would not have had such a hold on me. But a vault—

"Go on. What about it?"

She said quickly, as though to get it out before her courage failed her:

"To-night, hours ago, we found out that the door of the vault was opened."

After a long pause I said: "The storm."

She answered fiercely. "No, par foi, it was before the storm broke. Besides—"

"Did you look inside?"

"Not I. But our mozo—"

She did not have to tell me the rest.

She got up, and I watched her pace across the room.

"Don't go yet," I said.

This might have amused her. I must have seemed like a boy being put to bed by a nurse, and being afraid to let her leave me alone in the dark.

She stopped and turned to look at me. There was a look of tremendous triumph on her face. I could understand that well enough. You see, she had played a good trick on her mistress. She had told what was not to be told.

Finally I managed to say in a voice that I scarcely recognized as my own:

"Your old mozo was probably drunk."

"No."

"He lied."

"You wouldn't say that if you had seen his face when he told us."

"Anyway, he lied."

"Then you refuse to believe, monsieur?"

"I do."

"You want proof?"

"Most certainly."

"Then come with me."

I was taken aback by this. Was she actually going to take me to a graveyard at that time of night!

I glanced involuntarily out of the window. The storm was over, as far as any rain was concerned. There was a wind moaning dolefully through the willows and magnolias in the garden.

"You mean you'll take me—"

"Out there. It's not far away."

I could not quite understand. What was her motive? Perhaps she wanted to lay all her cards on the table. It was at least quite a disarming thing to do.

Every one would be questioned. Anything in the way of a secret regarding a molested tomb was pretty surely to be held against one.

But then as I followed her down the grand staircase again, and out into the patio with a lantern, another notion entered my head, a very peculiar one; but you can scarcely blame me for entertaining peculiar notions at a time like that.

I thought that this woman was impelled to go to that tomb for some strange reason far beyond my puny mortal analysis. The possibility of devils playing tricks on the ill-fated Scudder family seemed to appeal strongly to her.

Perhaps my absolute refusal to believe the mozo's story had aroused an element of doubt in this woman's mind. And she may have decided impulsively—now that the storm was abated—to convince herself.

Then again she might have been impelled by that motive that psychologists have long recognized, the peculiar influences that force a criminal to revisit the scene of his crime.

Be that as it may, we hitched the horse to the buggy, and rode out of the patio. I am convinced that the mistress of the house must have seen us, although the housekeeper told me that her bedroom was at a far corner of the patio. At any rate, we rode out to the cemetery.

She stopped before one of those brick and mortar sepulchers, in which there are shelves to hold the coffins. Over one was a small marble plaque giving the name, birthday, and date of death of Brutus A. Scudder.

A small door of heavy oak, grimly worked with wrought iron hinges, and locks, and bolts, was partly opened, just as the Scudder mozo had announced finding it.

There is no necessity of my dwelling on the less romantic aspects of death, the casket, and partially tipped lid. I need only say that the mozo had told the truth.

Morning has come, and I wish to add, before closing this part of the history, that the housekeeper and I scarcely spoke a word as we rode back to the manse. I did not even tell her that I had seen Judge Scudder at the Lone Star Hotel that night.

CHAPTER IV.

A RAY OF LIGHT.

ANOTHER day has passed. I am again in this musty old room, seated before the old Louis XIV escritoire. Yonder is the high window leading out like a door onto a gallery of filigreed iron.

The iron work has a crest wrought in it, not the crest of the Scudder family; for, as I have learned, Judge Scudder himself was not of Creole ancestry. It is the crest of his wife—Shirley's mother—which was taken from the ruins of an old plantation manse in Evangeline Parish, and worked into the railing of the judge's Texas house.

The room itself is a veritable museum of Spanish and French furniture, a Gothic chest, the massive bed with its canopy of mosquito netting which replaces the velvet hangings that had been the decoration used in France.

It is too hot for velvet hangings down here in the marsh country. I cannot say that the fauteuils, with their red plush, and the rattan screen, and the swamp grass mats mingling with a treadbare domestic carpet, produce a very artistic effect.

I begin to record the happenings of this day by mentioning what awakened me after an hour of fitful sleep. I heard the rumble of an old buggy, the pattering of horses' feet in the hard packed adobe of the patio.

The sound reminded me of my night visit to the tomb of Judge Scudder, and in my semi-wakeful state I had the impression that all buggies or horses heard in that patio signified only one thing, a visit to the cemetery.

I looked out and saw an old man descending from the contrivance, and hitching his two piebald horses to the post at the open end of the patio, where there was a water trough.

He was a very picturesque old man, with that ramshackle buggy and that drooping left shoulder of his which, I have since learned, was caused by a wound from a duel in New Orleans some forty years ago.

His face was slightly jaundiced, giving the effect of parchment. The best way to describe that face is to evoke the picture of Andrew Jackson. If he had had a mane of shaggy hair, he could have passed for Andrew Jackson when the latter was President.

But this gentleman's hair was thin and of a rusty red, as I noticed when he removed his broad-brimmed, high-peaked hat, and wiped his forehead with a bandanna.

I prepared to go downstairs immediately. I had only partially undressed, for I had brought no night clothes with me. I had left my satchel at the Lone Star Hotel, whence Cronk was to bring to my lodgings the next day. Pulling on my coat and boots and adjusting my tie, I hastened downstairs to find out just who this strange guest was.

The mistress of the manse and her housekeeper were in a suppressed, but evidently, serious altercation. I caught just a word or two of it before they saw me coming down the grand staircase. But the scene was providentially cut short by the entrance of the gaunt, yellow-faced gentleman with the drooping shoulder.

Almost immediately a certain point, about which I had been doubtful, was cleared up. All night long, while beguiling myself with writing, and even while tossing in a half wakeful state in my bed, I had been obsessed with the mystery of Shirley Scudder's going out into that storm.

Maizie, the housekeeper, had announced to me that Shirley had made this trip in order to get the doctor, and to fetch him to the manse.

I took little stock in this statement, if for no other reason than that there was no doctor in evidence when I found her on the road, or when I returned to the manse. Besides this, I had a deep-rooted conviction that the only explanation of the girl's being near the Lone-Star Hotel where her father had " materialized " himself, was that she was searching for him.

When you have a conviction like that, it

is hard to disbelieve it; especially on the contradiction of a half-breed housekeeper.

Well, it appears that Maizie's announcement was the sheer unadulterated truth. "Her mistress had gone to get the doctor—and she had returned with the town schoolmaster."

The gaunt old gentleman said good morning to the three of us, took off his alkali-dusted spectacles, and displayed a pair of cavernous, thoughtful eyes.

"I'm sorry I wasn't at home, Miss Shirley," he said, "when you called. My servant said it was very urgent."

"Did he tell you I left word for you to come here as soon as you got back to your house?" Shirley Scudder said, not, I thought, without a tone of resentment.

"He did. But, you see, it was a maternity case. Took a good six hours."

He replaced his spectacles and turned to study my face. A guest in the Scudder manse seemed to be a puzzling situation to him.

"You are the schoolmaster?" he said.

I nodded, and told him just how I happened to have spent the night in the house.

"Quite obliging of Miss Shirley to put you up. Well, she's always been that way—ever since she was a little child." He helped himself to a prodigal glass of the amanzanilla sherry. "I must pick myself up after this terrible night." He touched his lips with the red bandanna, and then said: "Now, then, what's the trouble?"

"I want to speak to you alone," Shirley said.

They retired to the library, and were closeted there for a long time. Meanwhile the regal Maizie and I were left together in the hall.

It was then that I heard of the doctor's picturesque past, his New Orleans duel, his renown in early days as a surgeon, his addiction to drink, his descent to the estate of an ordinary country doctor, his relation with the Scudders as their household physician.

He was, in fact, the only friend the late Judge Scudder had in his later years of hermitlike retirement. The doctor had officiated at the birth of Shirley, at the death of Shirley's mother, at the occasional sickness of the judge and his housekeeper and the old mozo.

He had even acted—in earlier days—as a sort of advisory veterinarian when the Scudder stables were famous for a breed of racers.

Indeed, Dr. Zobel was gradually losing the pitiful residue of his great reputation. He was a splendid horse doctor in a country where horses were more important than people. This doubtful fame, and his petty office as a deputy coroner were the last vestiges of his medical importance.

Presently the gaunt, rusty-haired giant came out of the library. On his yellow cheeks there had appeared those touches of color called "grog blossoms," the tracery of veins giving the appearance of some delicate species of red seaweed. Evidently Miss Shirley had served him some more of her rare amanzanilla or amontillado in the library during their conversation.

But the doctor seemed perturbed, nevertheless, and very angry. Miss Shirley had not followed him out. This fact gave me the impression that she had probably sent him out to dismiss me.

"I can't understand why all this fuss," he said, addressing himself to me. "A rather distressing matter, no doubt, the disappearance of the judge from his tomb. But what of it? Is it the business of a doctor—or even of a coroner?"

"Probably not," I said. "Indeed, I think it is a matter for the police."

"Good Heavens!" the old man exclaimed. "The police! It is the very thing that Miss Shirley wants to avoid. She told me just now that on no condition must we call the police."

He replaced his spectacles, and looked at me. One of the lenses was so powerful that it dilated his bulging, red-veined eye.

"I am of the opinion, however," I suggested politely, "that there should be some sort of investigation."

The doctor did not flare up this time. "The fact is, suh," he admitted, "I am somewhat of the same opinion. But Shirley is mortally afraid of a scandal. I am her only friend, and she is taking this beastly little business as a crisis.

"Confound it all, suh, what is there about

it that can be called a crisis? Some medical students from St. Luke's Hospital probably—penniless and unscrupulous rascals—want a skeleton."

"Quite plausible," I said. "But isn't that something for a deputy to attend to?"

"Or a thief," he went on, disregarding me, "who thought perhaps a man of Judge Scudder's wealth might have been buried with a ring or two—or, at least, in a fine broadcloth suit."

"Quite plausible likewise. But again I am of the opinion that such a thief should be caught. Would Miss Shirley—or any woman—want her dead to be molested?"

"Her dead?" I echoed. My own repetition of the words surprised me. The doctor turned upon me, glaring fiercely. I noticed that his eye, which was hugely dilated by the strong lens, gave him a distorted, uncanny appearance.

"Yes, I said her dead—her stepfather, Judge Scudder."

I immediately added a question:

"Just what did Judge Scudder die of?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you're the coroner, and the statements you make in such a case are the concern of the public."

He looked at me, nettled, then snapped abruptly:

"It was in the papers." It was an agreeable way of snapping, and reminded me of a grandfather chiding a boy.

"I can't remember what the papers said," I rejoined.

"A fever—probably contracted in the tropics years before, and recurrent."

"Have you ever seen other cases of that nature?"

"In New Orleans."

"And were the symptoms identical?"

He exploded with an oath. "Confound you, suh, do you doubt my skill in diagnosing a thing of this sort! Who are you anyway—a young country schoolma'am—"

"I happen to have reason to doubt," I said hotly.

My anger acted as something of a counter irritant.

"Very well. You doubted it. Three weeks after it is all over, a country schoolteacher stakes his word against mine!"

"To leave personalities out of it for just a moment, doctor," I said tersely, "may I ask if there is ever any such symptom in this peculiar disease you describe—a symptom, let us say, that is of a cataleptic nature."

He stared. If Maizie, the housekeeper, who was the only one to witness this conversation, had known what catalepsy meant, I don't doubt but that she would have turned color.

Finally a rather indulgent smile came over the doctor's long face. "I see," he chuckled. "You believe he was buried—a little too soon."

Maizie could not fail to understand this sentence. I was conscious of the fact that she sank to a chair behind me, and gave a frightened gasp.

"I rather believe that," I said.

"Let us have a little drink together—and stop this bickering," the old gentleman replied. He poured two glasses, handing me one, which I refused.

"I'll tell you why I believe it," I said calmly.

He did not turn to look at me, instead he held the amanzanilla to the light. Maizie, I believe, was riveting her lustrous black eyes upon me.

As the doctor held the glass to his lips, I said in the same unperturbed voice:

"I saw Judge Scudder last night."

Maize, who was rather dramatic fundamentally, leaped to her feet with a cry, clutching at her breast. She beat her breast in the fashion that I imagined she might have gotten from her remote ancestors.

Dr. Zobel held the glass of amanzanilla suspended a moment to his lips, as if undecided whether he needed it more than I—or Maizie. The inherent altruism of the man came to the surface at this point, for he offered it to Maizie, and seemed dreadfully concerned that she dropped it on the swamp grass mat on the floor.

"I knew some one would see him!" the woman was gibbering. "I knew it! I felt it in my bones! I was afraid to look over my shoulder! We'll all see him. We'll all go mad."

"Of course we will," Dr. Zobel said in-

dulgently. "We'll all go mad if we want to. Only don't tell Shirley any such cock-and-bull story. She is very high strung. Now, then, I'll have a look at your pulse, suh."

"It's no use, doctor," I said. "If you don't believe, you will—before the morning is over. There are others. My friend Cronk will bear me out. I swear by all that's holy that Judge Scudder appeared at the Lone Star Hotel last night!"

"I've known of two people seeing the same apparition before," the doctor said. "It's one of the problems of psychiatry. Come, my boy, forget it."

"And there were some traveling salesmen in the room. It was they who said it looked like Judge Scudder."

"So, ho!" the old man said, his dilated eye twinkling behind the spectacles. "You yourself didn't know it looked like the judge?"

He raised his shaggy black brows, and his lips smirked as though he said, "There, I've caught you, suh!"

But he had not caught me. I hastened on, my voice now taking on the excitement which I had kept under cover:

"There was an argument. Some laughed at the idea, of course. Some, who had known the judge, said it was his replica. I myself saw a very peculiar thing; I could not quite make out whether he was drunk or drugged. The thought has since occurred to me, that he might have been demented. He did peculiar things with his hands—clutching at cards. I can't forget those hands."

"But how well do you know the judge?" Dr. Zobel asked.

"I confess, doctor, that I have never seen him. But—"

"And yet you stand there and cast aspersions on my ability to give a coroner's verdict, merely because you saw some one who, according to a traveling salesman, looked like Judge Scudder—"

"The desecrated tomb—" I began.

"A coincidence."

"No, par foi!" Maizie cried, wringing her hands. "It is not a coincidence. They saw him! I tell you! I swear by the saints above they saw him!"

She was absolutely beneath the doctor's notice. He was concerned only with my testimony.

"The judge happens to be a man who could not be very easily mistaken," the doctor said. "I gladly admit that. Particularly that point you make about his hands. But the lunacy of jumping at any such conclusion — you, a fairly well-educated man, I presume—why, it astounds me, suh!"

"You have never seen him, *m'sieu?*" Maizie asked, gripping my arm in that savage, peculiar manner which I had noticed the night before. "Then, *m'sieu,* come here. I will show you!"

I was impelled to follow her to the foot of the grand staircase.

Just to the left of this, on the wall, and shaded by the gallery above, was a portrait.

I had not seen this the preceding night, for the very simple reason that the wrought iron sconce which afforded the only light that there was in the room by means of three candles, did not shed any beams on this particular part of the wall.

The effect at the present time was startling. Not that it was a very remarkable portrait, but the fact that the figure was painted on a black background, and that a certain amount of light from the window on the opposite side of the room cast a dim halo about it, made the figure astonishingly realistic.

I gasped, and involuntarily broke away from Maizie, who was still holding my arm with an excited grip. I went directly to the picture, and put up my hand, touching it. Actually I had thought, for the fraction of a second, that Judge Scudder had made another appearance on this earth.

There was no doubt about its being merely canvas, rather recently varnished over, and quite dusty.

The judge was represented by the artist as slumping at a table; his hands were gripping one of those big legal tomes with brown leather bindings; and I could not help observing the hands which were like chicken claws.

They seemed alive. There were heavy blue veins, and white knuckles, as though

he gripped the book tensely. The leonine head was not held erectly like a soldier's, as I had noticed the night before when the judge entered the hotel lobby. It was slumped down between his bent shoulders in an attitude of extreme weariness.

I must have gone into some sort of a funk. No, I did not go out of my head, or faint, or, so far as I know, even call out.

But I remember the doctor was pouring some powder into a glass of water, and was holding it to my lips, one of his big, lanky arms supporting me. My hands were gripping the frame of the painting, as though I were balancing myself by clinging to the rail of a heaving deck.

Maizie was on her knees at the foot of the staircase, wringing her hands.

"Thank you," I said to the doctor, as I turned from the portrait and walked—or rather groped my way—to a fauteuil. I sank into the deep, comfortable plush, and the doctor's stimulant began to work upon me. I looked up, trying to focus my eyes on something—something beside that vision, which I couldn't seem to eradicate even though it was now behind me.

As my eyes cleared I saw Miss Shirley standing at the door of the library, her oval face a high spot of pallid and beautiful light.

CHAPTER V.

"I WISH TO REVERSE MY VERDICT."

"THERE is no more doubt in my mind." I believe that was the first coherent thing I said.

"You saw him!" Maizie cried in a tone that had no element of questioning in it. It was rather a dictum, an accusation.

"I saw that man," I said, pointing my finger at the portrait. I imagine my hand was trembling violently, for the doctor was more interested in watching it than in watching the picture.

"Stuff and nonsense!" he grunted.

"He saw him!" Maizie affirmed again, almost screaming. "It's true, mon Dieu, may Heaven preserve us all!"

"Saw—what?" The soft, perplexed voice of Miss Shirley drifted into the room.

"That man came in dripping wet from the storm, and sat at a table—and reached across to clutch something, and his knuckles were white just like those in that picture—"

"Where was this?" the girl asked with a calmness that rather surprised us all.

"At the hotel—the Lone Star, back there; he came into the midst of of us—"

"Now we'll have a whole house full of lunatics," the doctor said in sheer exasperation. "Don't believe a word of what he's saying, my child. Go back to your room, and let me find out what's wrong with these two people—"

Then Shirley said something that was like a bomb, despite the refined, softly modulated tones.

"*I do believe him.*"

Dr. Zobel held up his hands in despair. "I knew it! A madhouse! It was a madhouse when the judge lived here—and now every one that enters goes crazy! I'll be the next one!" Then in immeasurable disgust: "A man dead and buried for three weeks, and you all believe he was gallivanting around in a hurricane! Jove, what a mess of lies and lunatics to listen to!"

He lifted his hands again, and shook his head as if disgusted with all three of us.

I was excited enough to get hopping mad at this attitude he was taking. It was as if I had embraced a new religion, and my faith was being scoffed at.

In a tone of frank challenge I shot out: "Look here, Dr. Zobel, do you believe in this thing they call the materialization of a spirit?"

He turned on me with a frank questioning stare, as if he didn't have the slightest idea of what I was talking about.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked tersely.

He raised his shaggy eyebrows, and again pursed his lips in that expression of amused scorn. "Oh, yes!" he chuckled sarcastically. "I'm not a medical man. I haven't a scientifically trained mind. I didn't get a degree at Tulane University, not at the Sorbonne, nor at Heidelberg.

"I haven't practiced medicine for thirty-five years. No, I'm just a plain Voodoo nigger—or else white trash—a swamp

angel, perhaps? Anyway, I believe in ghosts!"

If he hadn't been a gentleman born, I declare he would have spat.

"Very well, then," I said, attempting to quiet my voice. "You've told us very explicitly that you do *not* believe in ghosts; so I'll ask you something that may irritate you: is it more reasonable to suppose that that apparition we saw last night was a ghost—or was it a man whom you yourself in an official capacity had pronounced dead?"

This did not irritate him as I had thought. It struck him dumb. To be told point-blank to his face that he might have pronounced a man dead who was not dead was like accusing a saint of heresy.

"Is it more probable," I went on relentlessly, "that a man may be entombed for three weeks, and then find his way out of a bolted casket, and then out of a sepulcher that is locked from the outside, and then wander through a storm the distance between the Lone Star Hotel and Seven Bayous; is all that more probable than the appearance on earth of his spirit?"

"Confound it all, of course it's more probable!" the gaunt old giant raged. Then he stammered: "That is, no. Of course not. It's lunacy—the very idea. He was dead, I tell you! Do any of you doubt that?"

"I do!" Shirley said.

Those two words were much more startling than anything I had said. They were like a whip on the old man's shoulders. His jaundiced face turned to a colorless parchment, lit vividly by the grog blossoms on the sagging cheeks.

He took out his bandanna, and wiped his forehead. Then he spoke. I was surprised at the control he had of himself, his injured dignity, his outraged sense of integrity.

"Look here, my child," he said to the girl with quiet gruffness. "I am your only friend in this world. You've told me that. And you are one whom I love as my own daughter. Something strange — or rather nonsensical, is happening. A sort of mental conspiracy. You are in a web. Now listen to me, child!"

He pronounced it "chile," for every once in awhile a peculiarity of speech, learned in boyhood from his colored mammy, perhaps, would creep into an otherwise elegant pronunciation. "What do you think has happened? I do not know entirely. We'll clear it all up. I should say offhand it is some sort of phenomenon —mob psychology, we better call it.

"A hurricane. Every one's nerves on edge. Some one sees a man who looks like your dead stepfather. Every one believes. Every one fills in the details, as for instance you'll fill in the details of an indistinct figure, a man you see coming down the street who at a distance looks like a friend.

"Your imagination gives him the nose of your friend, the particular color of eyes, the mole on the cheek, the dimple on the chin — even though these details at that distance are too small for you to actually see. That is what happened last night with this young gentleman, and his fellow guests at the hotel."

It was quite a plausible explanation in its way. The doctor knew what he was talking about.

But here was a point he had forgotten, or refused to consider: I myself had not seen the judge before the apparition; I had not seen his portrait until to-day.

I brought this point out, and the doctor smiled indulgently.

"Your memory of what you saw," he pointed out, "may have been just as much subject to this warping, this 'touching up,' as I might say, as the figure of a man coming down the street at a distance. In fact, it is likely to be more subject to such falsification.

"I see a man coming down the street, and my imagination fills in the details, making him like my friend whom he resembles. You see a man, and then retain the image in your memory. Your imagination fills out that remembered image in every detail, making him like this portrait which he resembles."

I confess I was stumped. Dr. Zobel had satisfied me—as far as my mental view of the situation was concerned. I actually believed that he was right. I admitted it

to him. And from then on, he took a very friendly attitude toward me. But—

There was the peculiar faith, the conviction, the something that grips your whole body, your nervous system, your emotions. *I had seen Judge Scudder in that hotel lobby*—and although rationally I could no longer believe it any more than Dr. Zobel could, yet deep down in my being I still believed it.

The doctor meanwhile clung to the view that the tomb had been rifled. He had seen this sort of thing in his younger days as a medical student. It had possessed none of the concomitants of horror which gripped the lay mind.

The doctor's one desire now was to make his beloved young friend, Shirley Scudder, take a rational view of the matter. She was high strung; none could have known it better than he. And it was paramount that her feelings be considered.

"You understand, child, that there is no possibility in the world of the judge having miraculously arisen. It's sheer nonsense. It appeals to our imaginations—yes. It is something that has appealed to the human mind since the beginning of time. It is the basis of all our religions.

"Resurrection. Life after death. Life in the miserable form we inhabit here on earth, a rotten carcass of flesh and bones. We all want it—and when we want something we are eager to believe.

"But consider what I have said: I could not have made a mistake when I gave my coroner's verdict. He was dead. That's the first premise. The second is this: if he had been alive he could not have been entombed there, and then three weeks later have made his escape. Stuff and nonsense!"

Shirley answered quietly, but with a devastating bit of logic: "Suppose he had 'escaped,' as you call it, many days ago?"

We were all at a loss for an answer. Why not suppose that? Why not suppose that he had struggled out of his imprisonment the very first hour after the funeral guests had left that cemetery? Why not suppose that the opened door had not been discovered until three weeks later?

For instance, it might have been possible that the door had been open, but not ajar. Then some rat, or a strong wind, or some mischievous boys prowling around, had opened the door so that it could be noticed?

"Who was it first made this discovery?" Dr. Zobel asked.

"Our hostler, Pasqual," Shirley rejoined.

"H-m! Let us have a look at him," the doctor said.

The mozo Pasqual was called. He entered twirling a ragged sombrero in his gnarled brown hands. He was an undersized Mexican who, I learned, had been a jockey for the Scudder stables in the old racing days. He had been barred for some offense or other by the authorities, and since, for almost half a century, had been the stable keeper for the judge.

An ugly little gnome of a man with a long brown face, narrow-set eyes, one of which was blind, and reminded me of the white eye of a horse, unshaved, with the corners of his chapped lips discolored by tobacco, bow legs with riding breeches tucked into a pair of canvas army leggings, there was the picture of the fourth member of the Scudder household. I might say he was the third living member—but I am still counting the judge as one of the household.

"When did you make this discovery?" the doctor asked.

Pasqual cringed. He thought the august doctor was threatening him in some indirect manner. The bow-legged mozo, with head bent, the one red eye glaring through tangled strands of gray hair, was like a half-breed terrier looking up to the savage majesty of a lion.

"Señor?" he pleaded in a weak voice.

"When did you find that the body of the judge was gone?" Dr. Zobel repeated loudly.

"Yesterday, when the sun she is set," the mozo answered, twirling his sombrero more nervously. "I come home pronto. I tell the señorita."

"You had been to the cemetery before?" Dr. Zobel asked, or rather announced.

"No, señor— Yes, por Dios; yes. But I see nossing."

"Is it yes or no?" the doctor roared.

"He's been there many a time," Maizie, the housekeeper, put in slyly.

"Oh, he has, has he? What doing, I'd like to know?"

"I put the flowers at the tomb. I plant the magnolia which he loved. I plant the grass."

"Who told you to do all that?"

The cringing little gnome did not know what to answer.

"*We* did not!" Maizie said.

"I worship the maestro," Pasqual said humbly and fervently. "Ees why I mak' plant the flowers—"

"I see. Well, there are many questions to ask you, hombre," the doctor said, lapsing into the use of a Texas word which I believe was one of very few colloquialisms in his sedate vocabulary. "All I have to say right now is that you will not leave this house until I say so. Don't leave this hall. Sit over there. Stay put until we can get the deputy to investigate this."

"Santa Maria de Lazaro!" the wretched little fellow whimpered. "What ees this fonny business?"

But he put up no resistance to the order. Dr. Zobel was a personage of considerable importance in the Scudder house. He had been for many years. The gray-headed mozo shambled off to the chair which the doctor had designated, and crept into it like a beaten dog. It would have been much more in character if he had crept under it.

Meanwhile I happened to hear the easy gallop of horses' feet coming down the shell road, and then into the hard packed earth of the patio. Glancing out of the window I saw that my friend Tim Cronk had arrived. He had brought a companion, a tall man in a high-peaked sombrero, black coat, and riding trousers tucked into high-laced boots.

"It's the deputy!" Maizie said.

"I'm glad to hear it," Dr. Zobel said. "He's come just in time for my announcement. I wish to reverse my verdict concerning the death of Judge Scudder. He did not die of any Central American fever as I stated in my previous verdict. He was murdered!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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BONDAGE

THERE'S a little jay street in a little hick town
Far away from the clatter and rush,
Where my thoughts ever go, as the dusk settles down,
Where I walk in the candle-lit hush,
Where my mother is waiting with love in her eyes
And with pale candle gleams in her hair
For the lad, who would walk in the ways of the wise,
For the lad, who now lives with despair.

There's a little jay street in a little hick town
Far away from the clang of the cars,
And I dream of a lass in a plain gingham gown,
As she wandered with me and the stars;
Though I would be straying away with my dreams
To be treading that little jay street,
My soul is a slave to its glamorous gleams,
And the city has shackled my feet.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.

Down With Women

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "You're Under Arrest," "Lies at Any Price," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

THE outer offices of the New York branch of the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Corporation of America throbbed with excitement. To be sure, the outer offices throbbed most of the time, anyway, because the demand for hallocks was worldwide and growing. But this morning the throb in the outer offices was more pronounced than usual; it threatened to attain to the proportions of an uproar.

Seventy-two employees were eagerly discussing the advent of the new manager. Thirty-four of the employees were young women. Hence, the throbbing.

His name was Kenneth Ashley Coleman and he was so handsome that the motion picture industry lost approximately one billion dollars a year by not employing him. He had wavy chestnut hair, keen blue eyes, a fine, tall, broad-shouldered figure, and he was young enough to excite even the seventeen-year-olds.

That is to say he was still on the salad side of thirty. His smile was enough to make any poor working girl forget what her duties were for an entire working day.

It is strange how quickly an office force finds out all about a new boss, but in the case of Kenneth Ashley Coleman, it wasn't strange at all. They had been hearing about him, bit by bit, for several years.

"Did you see him?" said Mamie McNitt, of the switchboard, to Daisy West, of the files.

"Did I *see* him?" repeated Daisy, shifting her Spearmint to the other cheek. "Mamie, I ain't seen a living thing since!"

"Huh? What? Oh — Alamgamated Hallock Manfachring Corprashin of 'Merica—*good* morn-*ing!*" Thus, Mamie McNitt, into the mouthpiece perched above her immature breast.

It was an order of the previous New York branch manager, who had been a professional sunshine scatterer, this ordeal on the part of the switchboard girl, to utter that large mouthful into the mouthpiece for every incoming call. It was calculated to install feelings of brotherly love into the caller.

"So's your old man!" shrilled Mamie into the mouthpiece. "Is zat so! Go on outside and dust yourself off!"

She turned, with ennui, to Daisy.

"It was that wisecracking cigar clerk downstairs trying to razz me. 'Kid,' he sez,

'I'm in love. You have the cutest Charleston legs in the building.' Can you tie it? The nerve of that simp!"

"Well," said Daisy, vigorously powdering her nose, "I'm in love, and I don't mean mebbe."

"Kenneth Ashley Coleman!" cried Mamie. "Wheel it outside, kid."

"Ain't he a dolling!"

"Say, lissen, that guy's wiped his feet on purtier faces than yours and never knew they were there."

"Aw, shut up! You're jealous because he looked at me when he come in."

"Honest, Daisy, you astonish me. He didn't look nearer than ten feet on either side of you. He *smiled* at me. I'm sorta kinda glad I got my hair hennaed, after all."

"Gee, I think he's grand!"

"Oh, boy, so do I, Daisy."

Similar sentiments were being uttered throughout the offices of the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Corporation—factory and main office, Erisipelas, Ohio. The men had about made up their minds that he was all man and all right, even if he was kinda too good looking. The girls went into ecstasies.

A group of them, the prima donnas, as they were called by the less important feminine employees, hovered in a corner of the reception room. It looked like a serious conference. It was. They were secretaries to department heads, and they had privileges.

"He's a sheik. He smiled at me when he passed. Honestly, his eyes seemed to bore into the uttermost depths of my soul," declared Anna March, a small, wiggly girl with arched black eyebrows.

"He has the most wonderful teeth I ever saw," exclaimed Helen Gray, a demure girl, famous for the dry humor of her comebacks.

"Doesn't he remind you of Ramon Navarro?" gurgled Ethel Holt, a slim, green-eyed brunette with romantic longings and a weakness for movie heroes. There was always a photograph of Tommy Meighan or some other celluloid heartbreaker over her desk.

"Well, girls, he isn't married," announced Edna Brown, who was sedate but humorous.

"Kid," said Miss March, "I'm in luh-hove."

"Maybe he'll buy you a little Chrysler to run around in," suggested Miss Brown.

"Did you notice how naturally curly and thick his hair is?" inquired Miss Holt with a soulful sigh.

"How that man could love!" breathed Anna March.

"He is a sheik," Helen Gray echoed.

"He is well manicured and he ought to be married."

"He used to be an American full back, one of Walter Camp's selections," Miss Brown informed them.

"Yes, and he used to be the light heavyweight intercollegiate champion of New England," added Miss March. "I'll bet he's stronger than three oxen."

"He was an ace in the American Flying Corps," the romantic Miss Holt contributed. "He brought down eleven Heinies. Oh, I think he's sweet!"

"They say," Miss Gray remarked, "that he is responsible for making the hallock what it is to-day. When he became factory manager, the first thing he did was to double production."

"Edith Barton is rolling in luck," stated Miss Brown. "It is the opportunity of a lifetime."

Bill Rivers, manager of the publicity department, the man who had coined the ringing phrase, "Home is not Home without Hallocks," had strolled into the reception room and overheard the last few comments.

He was notorious for the devastating quality of his repartee. He now came close to the four prima donnas and hissed:

"Essence of the banana bush!"

And the four prima donnas each haughtily went her respective way.

The praises of the new manager were meanwhile being sung in other quarters. Somehow, every girl in the offices had contrived to catch at least a passing glimpse of the famous young man.

Presently the outer offices settled down to the busy humdrum of workaday. But there was in the air now that keen hum found or heard only in offices captained by a boss who is popular; by a boss who is liked or loved; by a boss who is himself an enthusiastic believer in his product.

You knew that hallocks were going to be sold as hallocks had never been sold before. You knew that Kenneth Ashley Coleman was a go-getter, an up-and-comer, a pep dispenser.

II.

EDITH BARTON was private secretary to Kenneth Ashley Coleman's predecessor, and she naturally inherited the right to take dictation from and to share the secret longings, hopes and despairs of the new manager.

Miss Barton was a slender girl of medium height, with wavy dark bobbed hair and beautiful brown eyes. One of the planks of her platform was that a business girl should always dress as attractively as a débutante, except that she should display better taste.

As a consequence, Miss Barton was always a pleasure to look upon. In addition to that, she was a real asset to the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Corporation. She earned sixty dollars a week—I mean, earned. Sixty a week is thirty-one hundred a year. And it is doubtful if a year went by when Edith Barton did not save the firm at least three hundred thousand.

Edith Barton knew the hallock business from the advertising appropriation to the zinc washers, or from A to Z.

She had appeared this morning in the walnut-paneled sanctum attired befittingly to impress Kenneth Ashley Coleman. She wore a dress of blue chiffon over a white satin slip; golden silk stockings; black patent leather Oxfords.

She might have been a demure and beautiful hostess welcoming an important guest, when Kenneth Ashley Coleman came in.

She would never forget the manner of his entrance. He seemed to plunge through the door as if he were dragging half a field of football players behind him. He was grinning magnetically.

"This my kennel?" he inquired.

"Yes, Mr. Coleman. I'm Miss Barton."

He had shaken her hand briefly, firmly, warmly. She had been thrilled by the manliness of him, and by the searching, rather fierce look he had given her. It took her breath away.

Then he sat down at the big walnut desk and began firing questions at her. During the morning he had her call in, one by one, the various department heads.

He knew most of them, but he called them in, anyway, shook hands vigorously, and Miss Barton, with little else to do while

this pep-distributing program was in progress, occupied herself in studying the young man.

She gave him one hundred per cent for sex appeal and dismissed the subject, for she didn't believe in mixing that sort of thing with business.

Her first impression of him had been that he was a little too good-looking; a little too much of an Adonis, but if his record were a criterion, he had certainly never permitted his looks to impede his progress.

Item: His hair was a wee bit too curly. It looked marceled, but she knew it wasn't. It simply grew that way.

Item: Forehead, nose and chin were too classic, after the pure Greek ideal. But they indicated strength and decision.

Item: His teeth were so perfect they looked false. They reminded her of a Pepsodent ad.

Item: He smiled too easily and too brilliantly—or did he?

Sheik? She doubted it. He had a reputation as a driver; he'd been a fearless athlete and a reckless aviator.

After an hour of him, she decided she could never get along with the man. She wondered why, and discovered that she was merely piqued because he had so far taken no more interest in her than if she had been a piece of furniture.

Each of Mr. Coleman's predecessors—there had been two of them in Miss Barton's time—had taken so much interest in her that she had had to slap the face of one, and to remind the other repeatedly that he had a wife and two adorable infant daughters.

By noon, she had decided that she liked him very much.

At one minute past noon, she hated him.

He growled: "Who put these flowers on my desk?"

They were two virginal white roses in a slim glass vase.

"I did," said Miss Barton, indignantly. "Kindly take them away."

Miss Barton snatched up the offending roses and hurled them, vase and all, into the waste-basket. She decided that she would wear heavy woolen stockings, low-heeled shoes, spectacles and an ankle-length black dress to work hereafter.

"I'm not accustomed to refinements," remarked Mr. Coleman gruffly, a few minutes later, by way of explanation or apology or both. "I've always worked in a factory. This is my first office job."

"I see," said Edith Barton coldly.

She saw breakers ahead. Small things happened that confirmed her perception.

He asked her to let him see a report on last year's business.

"Would you mind getting it for me?" asked Miss Barton. "It's in that top tier, and I can't reach that high."

How gladly his predecessors had sprung up to reach for a thing when she couldn't!

Her smallness now became a distinct liability. The fellow wasn't considering her in terms of feminine charm.

He stared at her strangely. Reluctantly, he eased himself out of his chair and procured the desired document. The king was not pleased.

Other things happened. They began to pile up, curiously. He caught one of the office boys in the act of kissing, hugging, caressing, and otherwise displaying affection for one of the stenographers.

He made no comment, but he did not smile. The king was not amused.

He surprised a group of girls powdering their noses and gossiping. They smiled and fawned on him as he passed. The king was not impressed.

A new girl, a fresh little blond thing, passed him in the hall and committed lese majesty by murmuring sweetly: "Hello, handsome!" The king was not flattered.

The climax came at about four in the afternoon when he strolled unexpectedly into the office of the manager of the export department. Mr. Graves was away on a flying trip to Washington, and his office and the smaller adjoining one, his secretary's, were full of laughing and chattering young people.

The prima donnas were giving a send-off party to Clara Briggs, one of their number, who was leaving that evening for her summer vacation. They were celebrating her two weeks of freedom with wop wine, cheese sandwiches and fig newtons.

Mr. Coleman came to a stop with his hand firmly grasping the doorknob. He blinked at the gay scene. He saw the lean, dark bottle. He moved one hand uncertainly across his eyes. A hush fell upon the joyous gathering.

"Wine?" asked Mr. Coleman.

"Have some?" Miss March nervously inquired.

"Real wine?" Mr. Coleman gasped.

"Made from real grapes!" Miss Brown laughed.

"Is—is this sort of thing customary in New York business offices?" he wanted to know.

"Well," piped up Miss Holt, flippantly, "it isn't customary for the boss to find it out."

"But—but is this sort of thing being done in most New York offices?" he persisted. He seemed a frank and earnest seeker after education.

"Oh, yes!" he was assured in merry chorus.

He seemed baffled and bewildered. He withdrew as if he were embarrassed.

"Incandescent papa!" Miss March remarked.

Mr. Coleman returned to his office. For some time he looked at the back of Miss Barton's neatly bobbed head, listened to the chatter of her typewriter keys.

For a long time he sat at his desk, plunged in thought.

"Miss Barton!" he called presently, in a crisp voice.

"Yes, Mr. Coleman?" She turned about, unsmiling. She was still piqued by the flower incident.

"Kindly tell Mr. Davega I want to see him."

Miss Barton went in search of Mr. Davega, who was the office manager, and presently she returned with him.

Kenneth Ashley Coleman drew what Miss Barton afterward declared to be a deep breath of determination.

"Mr. Davega," said he, "I want you to notify every female employee on our pay roll that her services will not be required after Saturday. Give every girl a month's salary and fill every girl's place with a man."

"Good Lord, Mr. Coleman—"

"That's final," the young man snapped. "Give every girl who deserves it a letter of recommendation, explaining the circumstances."

"But what are the circumstances, Mr. Coleman?" the office manager gasped.

"The circumstances," Mr. Coleman obliged, "are that this is a business office. Its business is to sell hallocks. I have never handled women and I don't know how."

"But—but how about the switchboard girl?"

"We'll have a switchboard man."

Mr. Davega, pale and trembling, withdrew, to adjust himself to the blow, and Kenneth Ashley Coleman turned back to confront the blazing, furious eyes of Edith Barton.

"Does that order apply to everybody?"

He nodded.

"Don't you think you're making a mistake?"

"I would not have given the order if I thought I was making a mistake."

"Don't you realize that it is frightfully unjust to turn all these girls out of jobs without warning?"

"Business is business," was his answer. "They will have a month in which to find new jobs—I mean, each of them will have a month's salary to live on while she goes job-hunting. They won't have trouble finding jobs. Business is very good. Babson says it is going to be better."

"I don't care what Babson says!" Miss Barton cried. "Some of these girls don't know anything but hallocks. Some of them have been here ever since they were old enough to start working. Some of us have made ourselves so valuable, by our knowledge of the ins and outs of the hallock business, that we're worth double what we're worth in any other industry. It's a rotten injustice, to fire all these girls!"

"I hope you're not trying to sway me, Miss Barton. It can't be done you know."

"Does that sweeping order include me, too?"

"I'm afraid that it does."

"You—you can't get along without me!"

He gave her a cold smile and an amused look. And Edith Barton contented herself with:

"You don't want women around you, is that the idea?"

"That," he agreed gently, "is the idea."

She stared at him through narrowed eyes. She bent down and softly tapped the edge of the desk blotter with the beautifully manicured nail of her right forefinger. Her nostrils were quivering like those of an excited race horse.

Mr. Coleman gazed up at her with something akin to dismay. Edith Barton had taken on the aspect of an avenging fate.

"You're going to regret this," she said in a low, husky voice.

III.

Miss Barton lived in a small, cozy apartment on Morningside Drive. She shared it with a girl who was studying at Columbia. In return for the free rental of a small bedroom and the privilege of using the little living room occasionally for entertaining a caller, the girl did the housework.

She did more than that. She washed, ironed and mended all of Edith's clothes and she prepared excellent meals. She admired Edith Barton tremendously, and had become a sort of man Friday to her.

It was an attractive apartment, warm in winter, cool and breezy in summer, and furnished as a girl with a good income and good taste would furnish her home.

Edith Barton had been living the life of Riley. She had no one in the world to look out for but herself, and she did this very nicely on sixty a week.

She had a small roadster, which she kept parked in a cheap uptown garage, and used for week-end trips and for an occasional evening airing; she went to the theater when she felt like going to the theater; once in awhile, she attended grand opera and, frequently, a concert.

All of this she had been able to do nicely on sixty dollars a week, making up her annual deficit by the generous Christmas bonus which the Amalgamated Hallock Corporation gave to all its employees.

Perhaps she was headed toward a selfish and arid spinsterhood as more than one amorous young man had warned her, but she was enjoying life. She was sitting on top of the world.

She dressed well and did the things she liked and, within reason, had the things she wanted. She loved her work. She loved the hallock business. She had been getting somewhere.

Now, brutally, she had been thrust back to nowhere. She would probably have to begin all over again at thirty-five a week or even less.

On the evening of that historic day when the new manager of the New York branch of the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Corporation had issued his ukase against femininity, an indignation meeting was held in Edith's apartment. Every girl who didn't have an unbreakable date was there, and every girl was telling every other girl in unmistakable accents just what she thought of Kenneth Ashley Coleman.

If he was at all sensitive to telepathic currents, how the left ear of that handsome young man must have burned!

Since the blow had fallen, little Mamie McNitt, the switchboard girl, had described him to all comers as a dirty bum. And worse! And how!

Mamie had been getting twenty-five a week, for long and faithful service, much more than she would receive elsewhere. She was supporting her mother. And hers was a typical case.

The walls of Edith Barton's apartment fairly trembled with denunciation. Presently Edith took charge of the meeting and brought it to order by banging on a tea table with a wooden potato masher for a gavel.

"Girls! Girls! Listen! We all agree that we loathe the insect for this unwarranted attack on American womanhood, but we have got to decide what we are going to do about it. We must take some action. We must map out a course."

"Burn him at the stake!" suggested Anna March, the wiggly, dark-haired girl with the acrobatic eyebrows.

"Tar and feather him!" suggested Edna Brown.

"Ride him out of town on a rail!" implored Helen Gray.

"I want practical suggestions!" cried Miss Barton. "I want to see that monster humbled. I want to see him cringe and crawl!"

"He deserves a great big sock in the nose!" put in Daisy West. "And I got a great big brother—"

"Girls! Please! Let me make a suggestion."

"Shoot it, Edith!"

The silence of anticipation filled the little living room.

"You see, girls," said Edith, "I'm really in a position to do him a lot of harm or a lot of good, just as I see fit, although he doesn't know it yet and may not for a week or two or maybe even a little longer. All you girls who do private secretarial work can guess what I mean. There is lots of valuable information pertaining to hallocks and isn't in any file—isn't anywhere but inside my own head. If he'd kept me on only a few months, he'd have had all that information for only the price of my wages. Now when he wants a piece of information he's going to pay for it. And, oh, how that man is going to pay and pay and pay!

"It may sound like blackmail, but here's the idea," went on Edith. "I know that many of you are helping your families, and some of you are the sole support of mothers and fathers, and I know that a few of you are sending brothers and sisters through school, and so on. Most of you are going to have to start in new jobs at much less than you are getting. That's going to mean a lot of financial embarrassment.

"Well, the idea is this. I am going to make him pay me through the nose for every bit of information he wants. The money I get is going into a sort of sinking fund. It's going to be for girls who don't land jobs at the end of one month, and for girls who get jobs that don't pay as well as the ones they've been holding. Now go ahead and nominate a treasurer."

"You!" cried twenty lusty young voices.

"Well, that's my plan," said Edith. "I'll bank the money in a checking account. Every girl ought to leave her address with me. When you need money, give me a ring and I'll send a check. We'll hold a meeting once a month or oftener, and I'll report progress. But that isn't all I want to do. I want to vanquish that man. I want him, before I'm through, to come before one of our meetings and beg us all to return to our jobs."

She was interrupted by cheering and hand clapping. And when that had subsided, she said:

"That man insulted me, and I'm going to make him pay for it."

"Lissen, Edith," piped up little Mamie McNitt, "why don't you make the big sap fall in love with you—and then hand him a great big armful of ice?"

Some of the girls laughed, but others nodded gravely.

"I think that's a swell idea," said Rose Ginsberg. "You got the looks. You got the best lookin' legs in the office, Edith. You're a positive knockout. Make him fall for you and then, just when you've got him gaspin' for air, hand him the gate."

"That," spoke up Edna Brown, "is what I call a sound idea. Taking money away from him won't hurt him, because he'll charge it right up on his expense account. Make him fall in love with you and then let him down so hard that it breaks every bone in his body!"

"Flatter him," suggested Miss Burton. "He's a sheik and he'll eat it up."

"All men are sheiks, the dogs!" growled Miss March.

"Bake him one of those chocolate cakes," urged Peggy Durkin. "Any man who wouldn't become goofy when he's eating some of that cake simply isn't human."

"Drag him out into the moonlight," suggested Miss Holt dreamily, "and make him count the points on any given star. You'd be surprised how gooey a man gets."

"Wear your rose taffeta gown when he comes to call," put in Miss March. "If he doesn't melt and flow all over the place, I'm an armadillo."

"Marry him," suggested Daisy West, "and then treat him rough."

"Girls," gasped Edith Barton, "you're asking too much."

There were shrill cries of dissent.

"Now, look here," spoke up Miss Brown,

practically, "if any of us was in your shoes we'd be willing to become a martyr to the cause. It is a golden opportunity for revenge. Every man is an Achilles. I mean, every man has a weak spot through which he is open to attack. With most men, it's vanity. With others, it's food. Believe me, I know my delicatessen. Try everything. You're a beautiful girl. You can make him fall in love with you. What we demand is unconditional surrender. What we want is to see the brute suffer. Suffer as he's made us suffer! Will you do it?"

"I will!" Edith Barton cried. "I will bring him to his knees—or bust! I realize that I am walking into a powder magazine with a smoking cigarette in my mouth, but I'm game and I'll do my best!"

"Atta girl!" cried the twenty conspirators.

IV.

On the following morning, after she had finished taking dictation, Edith Barton firmly closed her notebook, clipped her pencil to its cover and looked at Kenneth Ashley Coleman with her brightest smile.

"When will my successor be here, Mr. Coleman?" she asked crisply.

"Some time this afternoon," he said.

"To-morrow is Saturday. I'm leaving then, you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Coleman, "I know."

"And there are a great many thing he ought to know before I leave."

"I really question that," said the young man. "Of course, I appreciate your value to the corporation and all that."

"After I have gone," Edith went on, evenly, "any information that you may want from me will cost you money. Lots of money. My prices are pretty high. I'm simply warning you. Until to-morrow noon, you are at liberty to ask me all the questions you wish, but after to-morrow noon my official connection with Amalgamated Hallocks will be no more, and I will answer no questions without being paid pretty handsomely for them."

The young man gave her a flashing smile.

"You seem to be determined to go to war with me."

"I think you have been terribly unjust," remarked Edith, rising.

In the afternoon, shortly after lunch, her successor appeared—a pale young fellow with cowlike eyes and a timidly ingratiating manner—a yes-man if ever there was one. Edith Barton inducted him into his new position as efficiently as she knew how; she answered all of the questions he asked bearing upon the round of details. She was honest with him; she treated him exactly as she would have treated him if she had been resigning instead of having been fired.

On Saturday morning, when she said her good-bys, she had a clear conscience. It was not her fault that her mind was a treasure-house of information without which the Amalgamated Hallock Corporation would be embarrassed.

Four weeks passed. Clarence Weemple, Mr. Coleman's new secretary, performed his duties with dispatch, devotion and in a somewhat ladylike manner. At all events, he did what was expected of him. He took dictation nimbly; his letters were neat and nearly flawless; he obeyed the orders that were given to him.

A subtle change took place in the outer and inner offices of the New York branch. This change became more and more obvious as time passed. It was the change which must take place in any establishment, whether domestic or an industrial nature, when the feminine touch is lacking.

Dust appeared where dust had never heretofore collected. A great deal more smoking was done. An epidemic of pipe smoking descended upon the place. Cursing was more and more frequently heard. Neckwear became less bright; collars were changed less frequently.

A competition sprang up in the export department to determine who would go longest without shaving.

These were a few of the little things that went to make up the change. To the casual eye, no one thing in particular stood out. It was simply that the general atmosphere of the Amalgamated Hallock Corporation grew more and more masculine.

It became, in a word, a delightful office to visit. You could put your feet up on a desk. You could exhale clouds of vile

smoke as you puffed your vile old pipe. You could cuss to your heart's content.

You could stick your unshaven face out of your office door and bellow down the entire length of the main office:

"Say, Jake, what the hell became of that pink memo on the Philadelphia order?"

And a virile voice would respond:

"I don't know, and what's more, I don't give a sweet hot damn!"

Kenneth Ashley Coleman would come bursting out of his office in his shirt-sleeves, puffing away on a sawed-off corncob, beaming delightedly. It was the kind of atmosphere he knew and loved. He-man stuff.

"Call me K. A.," he told every one.

On the second girl-less Monday, every man found beside his desk a fine new shining brass cuspidor on a beautiful embossed rubber mat.

Three cheers for K. A. Coleman! Who's all right? *Coleman!*

"Lissen, K. A., why in hell did that pip-squeak quote that Baltimore gang twenty, ten and five off?"

"What discount 've you been giving him?"

"Twenty and ten, K. A."

"All right, kid, go to the mat with him on it."

"I'll cut his cussed heart out."

"Treat him rough, kid, I'm with you."

Can you imagine that kind of palaver with Edith Barton around?

A tough little Mick from the East Side had taken Mamie McNitt's place at the switchboard. No longer was sunshine dispensed to incoming callers. A hard-boiled young voice informed you that this was Hallocks. Whoja want?

Were hallocks being sold? You bet your sweet life hallocks were being sold! More Hallocks than ever before!

Four delightful girl-less weeks passed. Edith Barton began to worry. Most of the girls had found new jobs at less money. Some were already in financial difficulties. The four weeks' salary they had been given upon their discharge was exhausted; they were up against it.

Edith was compelled to inform them that the sinking fund so far was empty. So far, she herself had not looked for work. She had believed that her campaign would be a huge success. And so far she had not had an opportunity to strike a blow.

Thus the situation stood at the beginning of the fifth girl-less week. And then, on Tuesday afternoon, old man Keller blew into the office.

Old man Keller was purchasing agent for the biggest furniture manufacturing house in Battle Creek, Michigan. Once a year he came to New York to paint the town a wee bit red and to do his buying. His usual order for hallocks was fifty thousand—a hundred and fifty thousand-dollar order.

With this much K. A. Coleman was acquainted, but with no more. Jim Keller was shown into K. A.'s office by a tobacco-chewing office boy.

He was a rather foppish gentleman, with a massaged face and a complete set of false teeth. He wore a white carnation in his button-hole. His first question was: "Where's that Barton girl?"

"Gone," said K. A. "All the girls are gone. I cleaned 'em out. I want men around me."

Jim Keller nodded. "Good idea."

They proceeded to business It was largely a routine matter. Old man Keller could buy Buckeye hallocks, but he had always bought Amalgamated hallocks, and it was assumed that he always would.

"I'm going to need sixty thousand hallocks this year," he said.

"That's fine," said K. A.

"Do I get the same discount as last year?"

"Yes, sir! Twenty-five, fifteen and ten."

Jim Keller nodded and arose.

"All right," he said crisply, as he started for the door. At the door, he turned with a queer, twisted grin.

"Don't forget my little graft, Coleman. If it isn't at my hotel by ten thirty sharp—Buckeye gets my business. I haven't signed that contract yet, you know."

Now, Kenneth Ashley Coleman was a quick thinker, or he wouldn't have been sitting where he was. But this parting shot took his breath away.

He hadn't been thinking in terms of graft. He wasn't a grafter himself, and he

forgot that many purchasing agents are born grafters.

Also, he had been a little overcome by the fact that Jim Keller had increased his yearly order by ten thousand hallocks.

So, by the time he recovered his faculties and went dashing out into the office, Mr. Keller was gone.

Ten thirty! He had to have old man Keller's check at the hotel by ten thirty. He knew that Keller was an eccentric old duffer; had meant just what he had said. It would be just like him to switch that juicy order to the Buckeye people if his little "dividend" was forgotten.

K. A. Coleman promptly proceeded to demonstrate that he was nothing if not a competent executive. He must find out how much old man Keller was accustomed to receiving. It might be five hundred dollars. It might be twenty-five hundred. Who knew?

He called in department heads; he called in the bookkeeper, the cashier. No one knew. There was no record. There wouldn't be, naturally. Whatever split old man Keller got would be cunningly concealed in other items. The only people who knew were K. A.'s predecessors, one of whom was dead, the other of whom had gone over to the Buckeye.

What to do?

He exhausted the last possibility—put in a long distance call for the factory. He got the president on the wire, Mr. Jennings. The president could not enlighten him, but told him to exhaust every possibility to find out. If he, K. A. Coleman lost old man Keller's business, hell was going to pop.

"Your secretary ought to know. She's been there four or five years," said the president.

"I fired her a month ago," K. A. explained, perspiringly.

"All right, Coleman. You're running that office. All I have to say is—*don't lose Keller's business!*"

K. A. Coleman hung up the receiver with a trembling hand. He took it off the hook again immediately. A man of action was Kenneth Ashley Coleman. Fearless! Hadn't he brought down eleven German flyers?"

"Get me Miss Edith Barton," he snapped at the switchboard boy.

"Sure thing, K. A.," said that impudent child.

V.

FIRST an icy chill, then a warm glow ran the length of Edith Barton's spine as she heard that familiar, hard, masculine voice over the telephone. Nearly five weeks she had been waiting for this!

"Oh, yes; Mr. Coleman."

"You know old man Keller, don't you—buyer for the Beautiful Battle Creek Furniture Company?"

"Very well, Mr. Coleman."

"Well, he's just been here with his annual order, and he wants his graft."

"His graft?"

"You know about it, don't you?"

"U-m-m-m-mmm. Yes, I know about it."

"Well, how much is it?"

"Don't you know what his graft is, Mr. Coleman?"

"No, I don't, Miss Barton. That's why I've called you."

Silence.

"Hello! Hello! Are you still there, Miss Barton?"

"Yes, I'm still here, Mr. Coleman."

"Would you mind answering my question?"

"Not in the least, Mr. Coleman. How much is it worth to you?"

"Why—why—" he spluttered. "Do you mean to say—"

"Yes, Mr. Coleman, I'm a grafter, too."

"It's preposterous!" he snarled. "I won't give you a dime for this information. Hah! So you're going to try blackmail, are you? I know very well that old man Keller gets something between five hundred and twenty-five hundred—"

"Then why," she interrupted gently, "did you bother phoning *me?*"

"Say—" he gasped. "Now, look here, Miss Barton. I should think, after all the years you were with us—"

"That's just what I am thinking of. And I'm also thinking of the other thirty-three girls who were with you so long. If you don't know whether to give him five hundred or twenty-five hundred, and if you

don't want to pay me for the information, then why don't you get it from some one else?"

"How much do you want?" said the young man wearily.

"Five hundred dollars."

"It's a holdup!" he howled.

"Payable in person—here. F. O. B. my front door."

"I'll send it up by a boy."

"Oh, no, you'll bring it up in person."

"Very well, you little bandit," he growled. "And don't try any kidnaping stunts when I get there."

He arrived at a little after seven. Work had kept him at the office until late. He had taken a taxi and the taxi had been caught in a traffic jam. He was hot and irritable.

The sight of Edith Barton in a slim, cool-looking green gown did not appear to soothe him in the least. But he was compelled to compliment her serenity with a grin. He was a good loser; he had the greatest respect for any one who could get the better of him in any conflict.

"Please sit down," Edith said cordially.

He sank wearily into a deep, comfortable chair beside a window. A cooling breeze blew through his hair.

"You've got a pleasant place," he said, and looked at her.

It was the first time, Edith knew, that he had actually seen her. He involuntarily drew a slow, deep breath as he took her in. She welcomed his scrutiny.

She knew she was looking her best. Since his phone call, she had taken a nap and a hot bath followed by a cold shower. She had dressed leisurely, carefully; she had lingered an hour over her toilet.

She looked beautiful and serene and cool. She was alluring. Any man who looked upon her and did not register a thrill would have been subnormal.

His eyes followed her as she left the room. When Edith returned, she carried a silver tray upon which stood a tall, slender green glass on the lip of which was perched a split slice of orange.

A sprig of mint protruded from the glass. Ice tinkled in it. The side of the glass was dewy with chill.

The young man drew another long breath and gazed at the offering with mingled expressions of expectation and doubt.

Edith stopped with a little cry of consternation:

"Heavens! I forgot to ask you! Do you drink? There is a mint julep!"

"To soften the blow?"

She laughed. "You look so warm."

"I am warm." He relieved her of the mint julep and settled back with a contented sigh.

He tasted it and whistled softly. He sipped it with evident relish.

"Please sit down, Miss Barton. We haven't got much time. I'm due at old man Keller's hotel at ten thirty, you know."

Edith seated herself and looked at him gravely. Kenneth Ashley Coleman produced a leather billfold and extracted from it five one hundred-dollar bills, goldbacks. He handed them to her with a strange look in his eyes.

"Thank you," said the girl graciously, and dropped the money with a careless gesture on a table beside her.

The young man bent forward expectantly.

"Now, what graft does Keller get?" he asked hoarsely.

Edith gazed at him with starry eyes.

"A box of cigars," said she.

"What!" gurgled Kenneth Ashley Coleman.

"That's all, Mr. Coleman. A box of Romeo and Juliets."

He sank back in his chair. He drew a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat. He passed it across his brow. He restored it to his pocket.

"You little fiend!" he said.

"Have another mint julep," Edith suggested, removing the glass from his nerveless hand. "It's one of Mr. Keller's standing jokes. Funny, no one in the office knew about it. He's always talking about his graft. Why! He's the honestest man in the world. He'll be down in the morning, passing those cigars around. You couldn't wean him away from our hallocks —I mean, your hallocks."

The handsome young man continued to

look dazed. Edith left him and returned presently with another tall, misty glass containing a mint julep with a generous stick in it.

"How are things at the office?" she wanted to know.

"Just great," he said. "You wouldn't know the old place."

"I'll bet it looks and smells like a kennel."

"We're selling hallocks," answered K. A.

When she suggested that he remain for dinner, he decided that, perhaps, after all, he could. Estelle Gleason, Edith's man Friday, was sent to a cigar store for a box of Romeo and Juliets, and a messenger boy was called and dispatched to Mr. Keller's hotel with them.

Mr. Coleman appeared to enjoy his dinner immensely. He topped it off with four thick slices of Edith's famous chocolate cake.

Mint juleps continued to thaw him. He became mellow and confidential as the evening advanced. He told Edith that he was a man's man and really didn't know much about women.

"All my blustering is camouflage," he confessed. "Women scare the life out of me. That's because I've never had many dealings with them. I'm suspicious of women."

"Why?" Edith asked.

"Well," he said, "they're out for all they can get. I don't think any given woman loves a man very much. I think she loves herself. More woman marry for meal tickets than for love—I'd say about eighty per cent. All women are naturally gold diggers."

"Am I a gold digger?" Edith inquired.

"You dug five hundred out of me, didn't you?" he said with a grin.

"That was a business deal."

"So is every relation between a man and a woman."

"I think you're talking through your hat," said Edith. "What you say about women means that you think you're a woman hater. A man who says he hates women is just camouflaging the fact that he's crazy about them. Weren't you ever in love?"

He laughed. "I thought I was. Were you?"

"Often," replied Edith. "But never seriously. The man doesn't live I'd give up my freedom for. It's a man-made world and I'm a rebel, you see."

"H'm," said K. A. thoughtfully. "It seems to me you women are running America."

"We will run it more and more as time goes on," Edith promised. "Men have botched things up pretty badly. It's time for the intelligent sex to step in and take a hand. Have another mint julep."

"Thanks, I will," he said. "Do you know," he told her, a few minutes later, "I think you are one of the most beautiful girls I ever saw. You have the nicest eyes. Did any one ever tell you you have a charming personality?"

"I'm glad you like me," said Edith. "It softens the blow of being called a gold-digger."

"Oh, I didn't really mean that!"

"But you said it!"

"You're the first girl I've known in years who has struck me as being real. You're a real person, Miss Barton."

"Are you paving the way to offering me my old job?"

He shook his head vigorously. "I will never have women working around me again if I can help it."

"One of these days," said Edith, "you are going to swallow those words. Not only I, but every one of the thirty-four girls you fired a month ago are some day going to be back on their old jobs."

He said nothing, but his eyes over the top of his julep glass twinkled acceptance of what was nothing more nor less than a challenge.

Edith changed the subject by switching on the radio. She tuned in a jazz orchestra at one of the roofs and taught K. A. a Charleston step he had never seen before.

She sent him home at eleven o'clock, after he had wrung from her reluctant lips the promise that she would go riding with him some day in his new Hispano-Suiza roadster; that she would dance with him some evening; that she would go to some musical show with him some night soon.

At the door, he went through the motions of trying to kiss her. He was pretty fierce and determined about it.

"You're the sweetest girl I ever knew!"

Edith closed the door firmly upon him.

At ten next morning a florist's boy arrived with a huge bouquet of American beauties. He was the kind of man who would send a girl American beauties in midsummer.

At eleven he phoned. His voice was deep, low, and full of humble vibrations. Would she ever in the world forgive him for making such an exhibition of himself?

"Did you make an exhibition of yourself?" she said innocently.

"I was tighter than a new kettledrum, and more stewed than four gallons of boiled owls."

"You carried your liquor like a gentleman," Edith comforted him.

"Then you aren't peeved at me?"

"I? Of course not!"

"I was wondering," he said, "if you could have lunch with me."

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"Then you are mad!"

"No, I'm not, but I can't have lunch with you."

He was silent for a moment. Then:

"How about tea?"

"I might have tea with you," she said reluctantly.

"Great!" he cried. "I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll drive up for you, and we'll drop in at Claremont for tea. Then we'll drive down to the Pennsylvania and have dinner on the roof and dance. Then we'll take in the new Ziegfeld revue."

"Remember," said Edith, "we're enemies, and that I'm out for your blood."

"I love a good fight," he answered. "Expect me at five."

VI.

At the next meeting of the Indignation Society of the Ex-Employees of the New York branch of the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Corporation, which occurred two evenings later, Edith Barton read her report.

In the treasury there was three hundred and sixty-two dollars and forty-five cents. One hundred and thirty-seven dollars and fifty-five cents had been disbursed. Checks totaling that amount had been mailed to girls who hadn't so far landed jobs, and to girls who were unable to meet ends in new, poorly paying positions.

"Mr. Coleman," Edith went on to say, "is a perfect gentleman and a liberal spender. His love-making is of the cave man style. He drives a beautiful big black Hispano-Suiza roadster trimmed with sterling silver, and he looks marvelous in a tuxedo. If there are any questions you wish to ask, I will gladly answer them."

"Can he dance?" Miss March asked.

"He dances divinely."

"Are you, by any chance," Miss Brown questioned, "falling for this fiend in human form?"

"It was not mentioned in the terms of the agreement," replied Edith, "whether or nor I might fall for him. But the answer to your question is decidedly *no*. He is just like all the rest of them. He talks about himself constantly, as all men do. I feed him his lines and he does his stuff."

"Do you take your roller skates along when he takes you riding in that Hispano-Suiza?" Miss Holt dreamily inquired.

"I don't think he is the kind of man," Edith answered, "who would make a girl walk home from an automobile ride."

"Do you think he is falling for you as per schedule?" Miss Gray wanted to know.

"I am not quite sure," replied Edith. "He betrays many of the symptoms, but, of course, no fish is landed until you have him flopping and floundering about in the bottom of the boat with your foot on his neck."

"Did you feed him chocolate cake?" Miss Durkin asked.

"He devoured four slices and still looked hungry."

"Is—is he a hot papa?" little Mamie McNitt wanted to know.

"He is a very ardent young man," Edith answered, and shortly afterward the Indignation Society meeting adjourned.

It cannot be said that the course of love ran smoothly or that it ran jerkily. Rather, it ran violently.

Kenneth Ashley Coleman betrayed more and more of the symptoms of a poor fish about to flounder and flop about on the bottom of the boat with a foot on his neck. That is to say, he telephoned Edith Barton as often as four and five times a day on any pretext.

His eyes, when he and she were together, were constantly upon her. He worried and fretted when she seemed the least displeased. He began to exhibit a keen and jealous interest in her past. He sent her bushels of flowers and candy by the barrel.

He took to seeing her, on some pretext or other, every night in the week. He discovered that she was to have a birthday, and he forced a glittering bauble of emeralds and square-cut diamonds upon her, and celebrated the day with a party for two at the Ritz.

Edith did not spurn the brooch. An old-fashioned girl would have done so. Edith was not an old-fashioned girl. She accepted the brooch as legitimate plunder. It must have cost the giddy young man every dollar of fifteen hundred.

"It's lovely," Edith cooed, and had it appraised the very next morning.

He was the kind of lover that every girl dreams about. Handsome. Gay. Distinguished. Generous. Attentive. Thoughtful. He had all the traits that a man should have to make almost any girl fall in love with him.

Head waiters became fawning servants before him. He drove his car recklessly but well. He made love with all the ardor and earnestness of a starved cat attacking a piece of raw liver.

Edith was sweet, aloof, serene, and alluring. One night she almost kissed him, but a woman must be forgiven for an occasional moment of weakness.

He had been particularly gay, attentive, and thoughtful all evening. At her door, when they parted, a miserable look had filled his eyes. His mouth was near when he said good night, and she almost weakened.

But Edith had marvelous control. She shook his hand briskly, went in and briskly shut the door.

It couldn't go on indefinitely like this. They were sparring. She was certain that hot, heady promises would have fallen from his lips if she gave him an opening. But she didn't want to give him an opening; she wanted to keep him gasping. Poor fish!

Two weeks after their first evening together, Mike, the switchboard boy, came into K. A.'s office and found the boss pacing up and down near the big window overlooking the river.

His big hairy hands were clasped behind him. He wore a cornflower in his lapel. His eyes were dreamy and fierce.

"Whassamatter, K. A.?" asked the boy.

"Kid," said K. A., "I'm in love."

Mike nodded.

"K. A.," he said, with the air of one who possesses the concentrated wisdom of all the ages, "better men than us have fallen harder. Mr. Samuels is outside, K. A. Shall I send him in?"

"Send him in, Mike."

Mr. Chester Samuels was the president of the Detroit Portable Bungalow Corporation. It was the boast of the D. P. B. C. that the sun never set on Detroit Portables.

They were to be found in every land, in every clime, from Sahara to Alaska, from the steppes of Russia to the pampas of the Argentine. These clever knockdown houses were generally furnished with folding or disappearing beds, so it was only natural that the Detroit Portable Bungalow Corporation should find a large and growing use for hallocks.

Now Mr. Chester Samuels would employ no purchasing agent. That branch of this business he attended to strictly himself.

He was a pompous old gentleman with a head as hairless as a concrete boulevard, and a nose that resembled a ripe strawberry. He was constantly nursing it with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, as if to call attention to a fact already inescapable.

His eyes likewise had the pinkish yellowish tinge found in many elderly gentlemen who love their Scotch not too wisely but too well.

He looked wistfully about the office as he came in and absently shook K. A.'s hand.

"Where are all the girls?" he wanted to know.

"I fired them," stated K. A. "I find I do better without women around me. So does the rest of the force."

"That may be true," sighed Mr. Samuels, "but this place used to remind me of a flower garden. The dear little things."

"How is the bungalow business?" K. A. sidetracked him.

And for the next hour Mr. Samuels told how the bungalow business was. It appeared to be doing very well, all things considered. In fact, it was going to be a banner year.

"I understand that the Buckeye people are going to use phosphor-bronze bushings on their new line of hallocks," the president of the D. P. B. C. remarked presently.

"Well," said K. A. with a quick smile, "we have already changed to an alloy of nickel and brass. It never wears out."

"There is a great deal to be said for phosphor-bronze," said Mr. Samuels.

"There is even more to be said for a nickel-brass alloy," retorted K. A.

"I'll need fifty thousand this year," said Mr. Samuels.

"You've always been satisfied with our hallocks, haven't you?" K. A. wanted to know.

"Well, they say the Buckeye people are putting out a mighty good hallock this season."

"When better hallocks are built, Amalgamated will build them," K. A. quoted. "Ask the man who rides on our hallocks."

"I understand that the Gabriel snubber people are going to put out a hallock to compete with yours and the Buckeye."

"There will never be a hallock like the Amalgamated," said K. A. with all the fervor of a zealot.

"What has become of Miss Barton?" Chester Samuels wanted to know.

"I fired her with the rest of them."

"What a pity! She was just like a flower—a lovely rose."

"I think so too," said K. A. "The fact of the matter is, I am thinking very seriously of marrying the lady."

"You couldn't make a wiser choice. It makes my visit to New York pretty dull, not to see Miss Barton. Well, Coleman, I will tell you quite frankly I cannot make up my mind this year whether to put my order with the Buckeye people or with you. I'm almost reduced to the point of flipping a coin."

"But you've always given us your hallock business, Mr. Samuels," K. A. said anxiously. "Why change? Why go to all the bother? You'll require special new drills for the bedspring side bars. Haven't our hallocks always been perfectly satisfactory?"

Chester Samuels arose, and K. A. watched his every movement as minutely as a cat watches the behavior of a mouse that is still on the wrong side of the hole—that is, the wrong side of the hole as far as the cat is concerned.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," the portable bungalow president exclaimed suddenly. "You give me the address of that bootlegger I got that wonderful Scotch from on my last year's trip—and I'll sign on the dotted line. I believe he's the only man in New York who sells pre-war stuff. I know you don't give that address to everybody; that you probably keep it locked up in your safe; but let me have it again and I'll use your hallocks. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough!" the quick thinking K. A. gasped. "The slip of paper with that address on it is, as a matter of fact, in our deposit box at the bank. Let me bring it around to you this afternoon, and I'll bring the contract at the same time."

"O. K., K. A.," said the bungalow president.

The moment the eccentric bungalow man was out of the office, Kenneth Ashley Coleman instituted a thorough and feverish search for the bootlegger's address. K. A. had not even dreamed that such a bootlegger still existed in the whole of the United States—a bootlegger who had for sale a supply of genuine pre-war stuff!

K. A. combed the offices. But no one knew the name or the address of this particular bootlegger. True, every one knew the address of some bootlegger—a perfectly wonderful bootlegger, but the address in question was known to no one.

Mr. Coleman returned to his office and put in a call for Edith Barton, and when her sweet, lilting voice came down the wire to him, he said:

"Edith, wouldn't you like to do a great favor for me like a nice little girl?"

Now Edith fairly detested the use of the adjective "little" in connection with herself or any woman. She abhorred "little girl," "little woman," and "little lady," implying, as they did, masculine superiority.

"I am open to any reasonable proposition," she stated.

"What I want to know," he went on, breathlessly, "is the name and address of the bootlegger from whom Chester Samuels bought some genuine pre-war Scotch last year. He must be the only bootlegger in existence who is still selling such a rarity. Have you got it?"

"I have."

"Great stuff! Bully! Fine! Do you know if he is still selling this rare pre-war stuff?"

"I do. He is."

"Oh, fine, fine! Can I have his phone number?"

"Why, certainly you can, Kenneth!"

"You darling!"

"For five hundred dollars," added Edith.

Silence fell upon the telephone wire, a silence broken only by a frying sort of sound, which might have been caused by a poor connection or by Mr. Coleman.

He recovered himself sufficiently to say:

"You little bobbed haired bandit!"

"To use your own phrase," Edith replied. "Business is business."

"All right," he growled. "You win. I'll have a messenger up there with five one-hundred-dollar bills inside of an hour. Will you trust me until then? I mean, can I have that telephone number now?"

"I do, Kenneth," she said, softly. "You can." And she gave him the priceless phone number.

It was, this second surrender of K. A.'s, really the beginning of the end of the bitter battle of the sexes, at least on hallock ground. To be sure, the battle has been waged incessantly since the first woman walked up to the first man on earth and took whatever he was eating out of his hand and ate it herself, and it will continue until the last man on earth is eliminated.

This outcome is inevitable. How can it be avoided? All over the world, the birthrate of women is higher every year, and the mortality rate lower. When wars occur, who sends each man away to be killed? A woman!

All over the world, women are asserting themselves and demanding more and more from the male. Look about you, my friend. Who is dominant in the majority of American homes, a man or a woman?

All of this is a sad commentary on human progress, but the facts are inescapable. Man is doomed. It is the age of woman.

"I had lunch with a man this noon," Edith said to K. A., a few evenings after her latest successful holdup. "He said the office is a mess. The men aren't shaving any more. They wear the same shirts all week. They don't press their clothes. He tells me the place resembles a cross between an old-fashioned barroom on Saturday night and an overcrowded foxes' cage. He told me that the state of affairs down there is deplorable. All of the men have grown slovenly beyond words. Without girls around, how can a man expect to have any pride?"

"I'm not getting slovenly," blustered K. A.

"No. Because you're afraid of me. You know you don't dare come to me unshaven and without a bright clean collar and a nice, freshly pressed suit. The only men at the office who look even slightly respectable are the married ones and the ones who are in your fix—afraid of some girl. The others might just as well be sleeping in gutters. And they will be if you don't give in to me."

"What do you mean?" K. A. demanded suspiciously.

"I mean that, from all the signs and the underground rumblings, things are not going as nicely for Amalgamated hallocks as they might. You are losing orders. This is going to be the worst month you've ever had."

"There's a traitor in my office," growled the young man.

"It doesn't matter how I get my information," said Edith, "so long as it's reliable. When are you going to send out an S O S call for the thirty-four you fired?"

"Never!" he declared passionately. "I'll fight you to the last ditch. I'll never give in. Listen, Edith, can I have another piece of that chocolate cake?"

"You know you are helpless without women," she said scornfully. "Why fight a losing battle? The good general is the one who knows when to surrender."

"Not much, my dear," said K. A. "The good general is the one who doesn't know when he's licked."

"Then," said she, "you are a perfectly wonderful general. You can't get away with it, Kenneth. The odds are against you. If I wanted to win this fight unfairly, do you know what I'd do? I'd pay a personal call on every woman whose husband worked in your office and tell her the facts. If that didn't work—

"Well, I'm not going to tip off my hand. My advice to you, Kenneth, is to give in while the giving in is good. You can't win. The cards are stacked against you. You're being cold-decked, Kenneth. You can't fight women. We're too darned clever for you!"

"How about my piece of chocolate cake?"

"I'll cut you a piece of cake in a minute. Better men than you, Kenneth—and you are a pretty good man, as men go—have tried to fight women as you're trying. They didn't get anywhere. Remember what happened to Plato!"

"What happened to Plato? I cut classes the day they brought his name up in college."

"Plato conceived of an ideal republic, Kenneth, and his plan was not to have a single woman in it. It was to be of, by, and for men. No women admitted."

"One grand little idea," said Kenneth. "I'll have to read Plato. I didn't know those ancients had such sound notions!"

"Sound?" she mocked him. "My dear boy, do you know what happened to Plato's ideal republic?"

"Nope," he said. "But I'll bite. What happened to Plato's ideal republic?"

"Nothing!"

"How do you mean, nothing?"

"It didn't happen. It couldn't happen. How can men get along without women?"

"I'm doing it! I've got the finest organization—"

"Well, how about me?" she interrupted.

"What about you?"

"Can you get along without me? Can you get along without seeing me—for forty-eight hours?"

He arose wrathfully.

"You bet your sweet life I can! I'm getting tired of hearing about how indispensable you women are to us men. I'll show you! I can't get along forty-eight hours without seeing you, eh? Wait and see! This is a warning. I'm never going to see you again until you phone me and ask me to."

"Very well, Kenneth."

He snatched up his hat and started for the door.

"Kenneth!" she wailed.

Kenneth turned with his hand on the knob of the opened door.

"Well," he growled, "what is it?"

"Don't you want your chocolate cake?"

His answer resembled the roar of a lion whose tail has been pulled. He rushed away.

Two hours later—nearly midnight—her doorbell rang timidly. When Edith went to answer it, Kenneth Ashley Coleman, in all his blond young masculine magnificence, was standing there, hat in hand, head hanging.

"Why, Kenneth!" she exclaimed.

"I—I want that piece of chocolate cake you promised me," he said. "You did promise it to me!" he added fiercely.

"Come right in," said Edith. "You poor, poor boy!"

VII.

EVENTS rushed from climax to climax quite as fleetly as a gazelle leaps from crag to crag. What Edith Barton had said to K. A. concerning the tottering state of af-

fairs in the hallock business was unfortunately true.

For some reason, business was falling off. The *esprit de corps* of his office was as fine as ever—finer, if anything. The men, freed from the hampering and trammeling influence of women, were tackling the problem of selling more and more hallocks with a vengeance.

But something was wrong.

One fastidious gentleman from the Middle West, a prominent furniture manufacturer of South Bend, came into the office with the intention of placing his customary yearly order with Amalgamated. It was not a large order—only ten thousand hallocks or so—but it was of such orders that the great bulk of the hallock business was made.

The gentleman was ushered into K. A.'s office. K. A. pushed a pile of newspapers and other odds and ends from the visitor's chair to the floor, so that the gentleman could sit down.

The man from South Bend sat down gingerly and glanced at the blackened corncob in K. A.'s mouth.

"How are things out in South Bend?" K. A. asked affably.

"Things are doing quite nicely out in South Bend," answered Mr. Gosline stiffly.

"Quite satisfied with Amalgamated hallocks?"

"Well"—uncertainly—"I have been."

"Aren't you now?"

"I—well—" Mr. Gosline hesitated. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Coleman, I've made up my mind to put my order with the Buckeye this year."

K. A. laid his corncob on the desk and sat up, bristling. This statement was tantamount to an open declaration of war.

"What's the matter with Amalgamated hallocks?" he asked. "We're making them better every year. The new nickel-brass bushing means that they'll never wear out."

"I have no fault to find with your hallocks," said Mr. Gosline; "but, to be quite frank with you, Mr. Coleman, I do not care to do business with a concern whose offices resemble a pig-sty!"

He arose stiffly. K. A. arose even more stiffly. There was the aroma of battle in the air.

Mr. Gosline was a fussy, fluttery gentleman.

"A pig-sty!" K. A. roared.

Mr. Gosline, rather dramatically for one of his reserved nature, flung open the door into the outer office.

"Look!" he cried. "Yes—a pig-sty!"

K. A. looked. All about the great main office, men were sitting with their feet on desks. Some had their coats off. Others had their collars off. A few even had their shirts off. The air was so thick with tobacco smoke that it resembled a London fog.

"Where the blue hell is that bill of lading on that Kansas City shipment?" a disreputable-looking ruffian with a week's whiskers roared.

"Go look for it, you lazy bum!" a dissolute-looking creature in a soiled pink undershirt bellowed in answer.

Near by a hulking individual who needed a haircut so badly that his locks, having reached the collar band at the back of his neck, had started to curl upward, ejected a brown stream of tobacco juice at a spittoon and missed it by a yard.

"Disgusting!" said Mr. Gosline, with a shudder.

"What's disgusting?" asked K. A. innocently.

"If you can't see it, I can't point it out to you!" his caller snapped, and he stalked out of the office.

K. A. stood there, after he had gone, and looked and looked. Finally he saw it. A cross between an old-fashioned barroom on Saturday night and an overcrowded foxes' cage.

That was how Edith had described it.

As K. A. was a man of action, he promptly called a conference of executives. Drastic rules were drawn up. Every cuspidor was to be eliminated by morning. Every man was to shave daily. Every man was to change his shirt daily. Pipes were prohibited. Chewing tobacco was prohibited. So was cursing.

These drastic rules went into effect the following morning. The offices of the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Cor-

poration lost much of the richness of their flavor, but K. A.'s ideal republic was on the toboggan and events were hurtling to a conclusion.

It was, all things considered, a fortunate circumstance that clean-up week started when it did. Not more than twenty-four hours after the rigid new rules had gone into effect, Mrs. Lincoln K. Marbury stalked into the reception room and sent in her card to Kenneth Ashley Coleman.

Now, Mrs. Lincoln K. Marbury was nothing if not an individual. In her own home town she was a personage, and in the world outside she attained at least the rank of a personality.

She was a handsome black-haired, black-eyed woman, the richest widow in Michigan. Her husband had been the furniture king of Michigan, with factories at Kalamazoo.

At his death, instead of selling these valuable, increasingly valuable, properties, she had slipped into the executive chair, the mantle of royalty had descended to her capable shoulders, and she had become the furniture queen of Michigan.

Her slogans had swept the country: "If it's Kalamazoo, it's Kozy" "If it's Kalamazoo, it's Kute." She knew the psychology of her women customers, did Mrs. Marbury, and she was reputed to be one of the shrewdest business women in America.

Yes, it was fortunate indeed that K. A.'s wholesale clean-up campaign had been instituted before Mrs. Marbury's arrival. She was a beautifully gowned woman, and her manner was a regal one.

K. A. was flatteringly attentive when she was ushered into his office. Even Mike was impressed by her grandeur. Why not? Didn't her bedroom furniture factories consume two hundred thousand hallocks annually?

She accepted the chair K. A. held for her, and even before she had disposed herself in it she had asked the inevitable question:

"Where are all the girls?"

The question flustered K. A., but he didn't have a quick, alert brain for nothing.

"You see, Mrs. Marbury," he explained smoothly, "when I was sent on here from the factory, I'd never had any experience with working girls. All the employees in the factory were men, and that is where I grew up in the hallock business. I started work there as an assembler when I left the army, and I was in charge of the factory when they sent me East to take charge of the main branch office."

"You mean to tell me, young man, that you fired all of the girls who were working here?"

"I— Well, it amounted substantially to that, Mrs. Marbury. I treated them fairly enough. I gave each one a month's salary in advance and an excellent letter of recommendation."

The furniture queen was regarding him coldly.

"In other words, you couldn't make the adjustment easily to girls in an office, so, rather than make the effort, you discharged all of them?"

"I—I suppose it does boil down to that."

"I have always used your hallocks on my beds," said Mrs. Marbury. "I have never had any fault to find with them."

"Nothing but the best materials and the best workmanship goes into our hallocks," said K. A. hopefully.

"However," she said crisply, "I am suspicious of an organization that is made up entirely of men. As you may know, the heads of all my departments are women, but their assistants are all men. Some of my department heads have strongly urged me to eliminate men entirely from our offices and even our factories, but I have opposed them. My long experience has proved to me that women are more responsible, more naturally fitted to be executives, than men; but men *are* useful in inferior capacities. *I* did not ruthlessly discharge men when I took charge of the business, because I did not wish to create an unbalanced state of affairs. I am suspicious of an organization made up entirely of men, just as I would be skeptical of an organization formed entirely of women. The two must work together, Mr. Coleman."

"There is a great deal in what you say," K. A. agreed.

"I know business, Mr. Coleman."

"Indeed you do, Mrs. Marbury."

"I was planning to place my usual half-million-dollar order for hallocks with you," the furniture queen went on. "But I have never yet placed that order with a man, and what is more," she firmly declared, "I never shall. A woman will be honest with me where one of you men won't. Hitherto, I have always done business with Miss Barton. By the way, where is Miss Barton?"

"She is, in a way, still in our employ," K. A. gasped, seizing this straw. "It can be very easily arranged, I am sure, for you to transact business with her. Shall I make an appointment for her to call upon you, Mrs. Marbury?"

"Kindly instruct Miss Barton to meet me for luncheon at one. I am stopping at the Ritz."

"Sunk!" groaned the pale young man when the elevator door had closed upon her queenly figure. "Sunk without a trace!"

He returned to his private office, trembling in anticipation of the crushing terms with which Edith Barton would meet his proposal. The whip-hand was hers at last. If she commanded him to roll a peanut around the block with his nose, he would have to roll a peanut around the block with his nose.

With sagging shoulders and in a dreary voice, he instructed Mike to connect him with Miss Barton's apartment.

Her voice came to him merrily, and he winced.

"Edith," he said gloomily, "would you like to do a great big favor for me?"

"Why, Kenneth, you know I'd just love to do a favor for you!" she caroled.

"Mrs. Marbury is in town."

"Oh, how nice!"

"Ah, yes, how nice! She is here to buy hallocks. She will deal with no one but you. It is her usual half million dollar order. If I lose that order I lose my job. Will you kindly have a heart, Edith? I am down. My nose is in the dust. I am willing to make generous terms. You have it in your power to make me or break me. I am absolutely at your mercy. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Why, you poor lamb, do you think for a moment I would take advantage of you when you're in such a pitiable predicament?"

"Wouldn't you?" he said hopefully.

"You know darned well I would!" she said cheerily.

"Tell me the worst," he begged. "How much?"

"How about five thousand dollars?"

K. A. could have leaped into the air. He could have kissed and hugged the fat lady in a circus, so great was his relief.

"You angel!" he cried. "Fair enough. Five thousand dollars."

"And other valuable considerations," she added sweetly.

"Huh? What? Edith, are you kidding me? What do you mean, other valuable considerations?"

"I haven't quite decided," said Edith.

"You're going to burn me at the stake yet!"

"My dear boy, why should you dream that I am going to let you off easy? Be your sensible self. When shall I meet Mrs. Marbury?"

"At one," he blurted out. "Luncheon. The Ritz."

"I'll be there!"

"Edith, listen, for the love of Pete, what are these other valuable considerations?"

"It is too early to say. But take my advice, my dear, and start suffering now. Suffer all you possibly can, for you are apt to need a very chastened spirit when you see me again."

VIII.

"It descended just like a bolt of lightning from the blue," said Edith Barton to Mrs. Lincoln Marbury. "There wasn't a second of warning. There was little or no justification. He simply didn't want women around, so he fired the lot of us, kit and kaboodle."

Mrs. Marbury thoughtfully exhaled a noseful of cigarette smoke and nodded.

"Something is wrong with the picture," she said presently. "Are you still working for Amalgamated, or aren't you?"

"I am K. A. Coleman's worst enemy,"

Edith replied. And she explained to the furniture queen of Michigan just how the situation stood.

"Twenty of the girls have found new positions. Fourteen are still out of work. So far we've been able to finance ourselves without difficulty. With the commission I will get for landing your order, we can take care of ourselves indefinitely—provided he won't meet my other terms."

"I see. Miss Barton, I've almost decided not to let you have my order. I think I'll give it to the Buckeye. I'll gladly contribute five thousand dollars to your sinking fund. We women must stick together. I am rich. I'd love to help. I'll find positions in my Kalamazoo offices for all the unemployed girls, and I'll pay their railroad fares. I do admire the fight you're putting up against that selfish young man. Yes, I'll give my hallock business to Buckeye. I like their slogan, too: 'Buckeye hallocks make even an army cot ride like a Rolls-Royce.'"

"I do hope you won't do that," Edith said, earnestly. "I want to punish him, but I don't want to ruin him. You see, I really intend to marry him."

"Why not?" said Mrs. Marbury. "He is not unattractive. I imagine he would make a quite acceptable husband. Easily handled by a clever girl like yourself. And he should be able to support you very comfortably. He makes a good salary and he has a really good future, I should say."

"Then you will let me have your order, Mrs. Marbury?"

"Of course, my dear, if it will help your cause."

"It will help my cause—tremendously."

"I will back you up in any demands you wish to make," the furniture queen said decisively. "And at any time you wish a position in my Kalamazoo organization, rest assured it will be waiting for you."

"In case he slips through my net," said the lovely girl, "I will be delighted to accept your offer. But I have him pretty firmly hooked. All I am waiting for is a good, clear moonlight night. He is practically wrapped up, Mrs. Marbury, and waiting my convenience for delivery to the nearest minister."

"Clever girl!" the lady from Kalamazoo murmured. "You will go a long way in this world. But no matter what betides, do not remove your heel from his neck—ever!"

IX.

EDITH BARTON phoned her ex-employer as soon as she arose from the luncheon table.

"Well," she said, "I landed the order—at least, tentatively."

Kenneth Ashley Coleman had himself spent a lunchless noon. He had smoked innumerable powerful cigars and spent the time pacing up and down in his office like a caged tiger. Now his voice at the telephone mouthpiece throbbed with eagerness.

"How—how do you mean, dear—tentatively?"

"I mean, Mrs. Marbury is behind me to the last ditch. She will not sign her name to the contract until I have given her my word that all is as I wish it to be. Will you bring the five thousand to my apartment this evening?"

"Yes," he panted. "Of course I will! Now, for God's sake, tell me what you meant by 'other valuable considerations!'"

"You will learn in due time, my dear. Would you like to come for dinner?"

"No!" he roared.

"I'm going home now and bake a chocolate cake," she said.

"All right," he groaned. "I'll be there."

"Seven o'clock," she said sweetly.

She went home and spent the afternoon making the cake and notifying each of the thirty-four members of the Indignation Society that a special, highly important meeting was to be held that evening. Eight thirty sharp!

At eight fifteen that evening, dinner being over, Edith suggested to K. A. that they go for a little stroll. She did not want him to be present when the girls arrived one by one and two by two. That would have been merely embarrassing. And what Edith Barton wanted was drama. (What woman doesn't?)

So they went for the little stroll. Edith managed matters so that the bell in the Columbia chapel was just tolling off the

hour of nine when they returned. A half hour, she believed, would give each member of the Indignation Society a generous interpretation of her eight thirty sharp.

The shrill note of eager young voices met them as they climbed the stairs.

"A party must be going on somewhere," K. A. opined.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Edith agreed.

The shrill note became a babble when Edith unlocked the door and flung it open.

Kenneth Ashley Coleman hung back. He gazed into the packed living room with eyes that seemed to bulge.

"A frame-up!" he said hoarsely.

"Walk in!" Edith ordered.

He uttered a short, hollow laugh. "Just catch me walking into this den of leopard women!"

"Will you or won't you?"

"Hah! Good night, Edith! I'll phone you in the morning!"

He turned to go.

"Kenneth," said Edith, tensely, "if you walk out on me now, you can say good-by to Mrs. Marbury's hallock business."

K. A. hesitated.

"Are they going to tear me limb from limb?"

"Certainly not. We're all gathered here simply to discuss the other valuable considerations I mentioned."

"Including my hide!"

"Coward!"

"I'm not!"

"Then walk in."

Kenneth Ashley Coleman, drawing a deep breath and looking very pale and ill at ease, walked in upon a sudden leaden hush.

Every object of furniture in the apartment that could be sat upon had been commandeered. There was nowhere for K. A. Coleman to sit, and being embarrassed when you are sitting down cannot compare with how embarrassed you can be standing up.

The girls who had formerly been in his employ were not embarrassed. They were astonished, that is all. They had expected anything but this dénouement. They had only known that an urgent matter had risen, and that they must break all dates and attend the special meeting.

Not one eye in that roomful contained a spark, a hint, a *soupçon* of sympathy for the embarrassed young man. They gazed at him with the candid frankness of modern girlhood. They would have gazed similarly upon a pink-eyed kus-kus in a cage at the zoo.

To them he was simply a monster to be trained and brought to eat out of the hand without snapping at the fingers; in short, merely a man.

Girls were sitting at his feet, looking up at him with calm, cool detachment. Other girls were sitting on chairs or perched on tables. All eyed him calmly, dispassionately.

"Well, girls," Edith started things off, "here is our beloved ex-boss in the flesh."

A low murmur, like that heard far in the distance on cold winter nights when the timber wolves are abroad, seemed to fill the little living room.

K. A. shivered apprehensively. He turned a shade paler. He looked appealingly at Edith, but she, facing the girls, had no attention to give him. She was a crisp young business woman.

"He has come here to-night to say a few words to you," continued Edith. "He wishes to apologize for his affront upon the honor and glory of young American womanhood. He insists upon getting down on his knees—on his knees, I repeat—and begging each and every one of you to return to your positions at a uniform salary increase of ten per cent."

"Never!" cried K. A. in a hoarse voice.

"The alternative," Edith went on, and every eye, you may rest assured, was upon her, "is that he loses his position as head of the New York branch of the Amalgamated Hallock Manufacturing Corporation."

Paler and paler became the handsome, distinguished looking young man.

"In either event, we win. I had a long talk to-day, girls, with Mrs. Lincoln Marbury, president of the Kalamazoo Komfey Furniture Corporation. She tells me she is behind me to the last ditch. Amalgamated hallocks cannot exist without us. Mrs. Marbury is behind us, and will finance a campaign—if this monster remains unreasonable—to inform every woman in this

great nation of ours that Amalgamated hallocks will not employ women; that they show a preference for men. We will smash Amalgamated hallocks into the dust!"

"Hooray!"

"Great!"

"Grand!"

"Attababy!"

Such were the expressions of approval that fell upon Kenneth Ashley Coleman's dazed ears.

"You wouldn't!" he groaned.

"Wouldn't we!" chorused the Indignation Society in a single voluminous breath.

In spite of the fleetness with which his mind worked, the horrible truth was slow to dawn upon K. A. Coleman. He saw himself smashed down to the bottom of the ladder, just when he was climbing so swiftly, so surely.

He saw the women of America, organized, battering the Amalgamated Hallock into the dust of oblivion. Battering, battering, battering—

With painful slowness, the unhappy young man came to his knees. His movements were watched with the liveliest curiosity.

"Young women," he got out in a choked voice, "I retract all of my statements. I apologize. I—I beg you to return to your old positions at a ten per cent increase in salary."

He arose, indignant and defiant.

"Have I said enough?"

"You have said your say like the gentleman that you are," said Edith. "I know that every one of the girls admires you and respects you as never before. And I can assure you that you will not be sorry for taking this step."

"Now, can I go?"

"Not yet," said Edith. "Girls, the Indignation Society is automatically disbanded. We have won our point. There is, at this moment, five thousand six hundred and seventy-four dollars and eighty-two cents in the sinking fund. It will be divided among you equally. I will have the checks in the mail in the morning. If there are any further questions you would like to ask me before this meeting permanently adjourns, I will gladly answer them."

"When do we go to work?" Mamie McNitt piped up.

"When do we go to work?" Edith repeated.

"Monday," growled the handsome boss.

He waited until the girls had gone, and when the last of them had departed he faced Edith with a stern, implacable expression, his arms folded upon his chest, his chin jutting out.

"I will never forgive you for treating me as you have to-night," he said. "I've put up with your ridicule. I've put up with your abuse. I've put up with every species of unkindness you hand out. But to-night you've humiliated me in a way that I can never forgive. Under the terms of the agreement, you can have your job back if you want it. I sincerely hope you don't take advantage of that agreement. I never want to see you again as long as I live. Good night!"

He slammed the door behind him as he left.

Edith Barton confronted that blank door. The color drained from her lovely face. She caught one hand in an involuntary gesture to her heart.

"Ken!" she moaned to the closed door. "You don't mean that!"

She hastened to the window. She could see the Hispano-Suiza roadster parked at the curb. She saw him emerge from the downstairs door and slowly walk across the sidewalk and climb in.

"Ken!" she called.

His face appeared, a white oval, as he looked up.

"Wait a minute!"

She seized a scarf, flung open the door and raced down the steps. She tore across the lobby and out across the sidewalk.

"Ken!"

"Well, what is it?"

"Let's take a ride."

"All right," he growled.

They drove up Riverside Drive to the end, turned about and drove back without saying a word. At a spot overlooking the Hudson he stopped the car.

K. A. turned in his seat and looked at Edith. She gave him a faint smile. He drew a deep breath.

"Will you marry me?" he snarled.

"Why, yes, dear," she gasped. "When?"

X.

THE poor creature became sentimental as they drove to Edith's apartment. He adored her, even if she had made him suffer so. Three times he stopped the car and fiercely kissed her.

"I want you to distinctly understand," he said, ruthlessly splitting an infinitive as he kissed her good night at her doorway, "that there is going to be no question, after we are married, who is going to be the boss in this family."

"But, darling," she cooed, "there isn't the slightest question."

"You bet there isn't!" snapped K. A. Coleman, and he took his departure.

They were to have dinner in her apartment at seven the following evening. He arrived at six fifteen, white-faced, gray-lipped, and blazing of eye.

"I've just found out the truth," he snapped. "You don't love me. You've never loved me. It was nothing but a put-up job to humiliate me, to punish me for firing you girls. I'm through. I'm never going to see you again. This is final. Good-by."

"But aren't you going to stay for dinner, darling?"

"No!" he thundered.

"And I made such a nice chocolate cake for you!"

He snorted derisively. "Tricks! Yah! Flatter them! Feed them chocolate cake! Humiliate them and make them like it. Good-by! I hope to Heaven I never see you again as long as I live!"

The door slammed. Edith smiled. She knew that the fish was hooked. He might dash away to the end of the line, but he would be back!

There was a fierce ringing of the doorbell an hour later. She hid the book she had been reading—"Why We Behave Like Human Beings"—and opened the door.

K. A. was standing there, haggard, white, disheveled.

"I'm back!" he growled.

"Come in, Ken."

He stalked into the room. He kicked the door shut and seized her by the shoulders. His eyes blazed wildly into hers.

"I want to know," he panted, "whether or not you love me."

"I said I'd marry you, didn't I?"

"Answer my question!" he roared.

"I don't see why I should," she retorted calmly.

"I've got to know, that's why. God knows, I've suffered enough. You've subjected me to every kind of humiliation imaginable. I've shown you from the very beginning that I love you. Answer my question. Do you love me?"

"I'm not going to tell you. If you don't want to marry me, you don't have to. It's up to you, Kenneth."

"I've got to know!" he burst out, almost with a sob.

"Darling," she said gently, "you'll never know."

He swept his arms about her. He hugged her so fiercely that she became breathless and almost limp. He placed burning kisses all over her face and neck and shoulders.

K. A. Coleman was breathless himself when he had concluded this caveman demonstration.

"Now I'll know," he pouted.

"Sweetheart," she said in an exhausted whisper, "you'll never know."

"We are going to be married to-morrow," he announced.

XI.

WHEN Edith returned from her brief honeymoon in Atlantic City and established herself in K. A.'s luxurious apartment on Park Avenue, the first of her friends to call upon her were the four hallock prima donnas.

"How is everything at the office?" Edith wanted to know.

"Everything is serene," answered Edna Brown. "We have had the office thoroughly fumigated, and everybody is happy."

"Some of the men were a little uppish at first," said Helen Gray, "but we soon put them in their places."

"What we want to know," inquired Anna March, "is how did you do it?"

"You became very mysterious toward the

end," added Ethel Holt. "We crave details."

"Why—" said Edith. "Why love conquers all. That's all."

The four hallock prima donnas laughed mirthlessly.

"Did you feed him chocolate cake?" Miss Brown asked.

"Did you flatter him?" Miss Gray demanded.

"Did you get him out under the moon?" Miss Holt wanted to know.

"I followed your advice to the letter," said Edith.

The four girls looked at her.

"There is one more thing we want to know," said Miss March.

"Yes," said Miss Brown. "To satisfy our curiosity, are you or are you not in love with your husband?"

"Your answer," said Miss Holt, "will positively remain a secret, locked forever in our bosoms."

Edith looked first at one and then another.

"Will you positively promise not to tell?"

"Positively," chorused the quartet of hallock beauties.

"Well," Edith whispered, "I'm in love."

THE END

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THE FENCE RIDER'S LAMENT

SETTIN' by my camp fire with my supper gettin' cool,
I'm jes' blue an' not jes' like I'm feelin' as a rule.
Want to saddle up an' ride to town upon a spree,
But I'm ridin' fence an' there's a top-hand trustin' me.

Reckon I'm as lonesome as that coyote is out there,
Yellin' loud an' mournful, with his nose stuck in the air.
Kinder wish he'd come around an' share my mess o' beans,
For I'm cravin' company, an' all it really means.

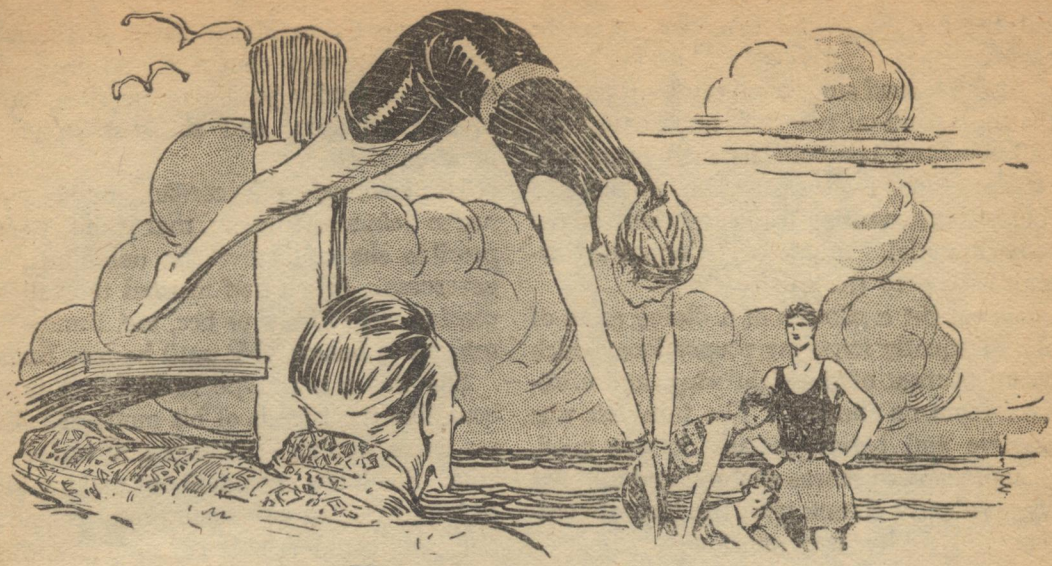
Ridin' fence that stretches out beyond the cattle's range,
From each sunrise till it's set, can make a man feel strange.
Nothin' round to talk to but his cayuse an' himself,
Gets a rider feelin' fate has left him on the shelf.

Never much excitement, only when I chase a "stray"
That has broken through the fence to make its own sweet way.
Even then I'm wishin' that I had the steer's pluck,
An' I'd amble for my pay an' start to run amuck.

Rustlers haven't bothered with the herd for quite a spell,
Kinder wish they'd waken up an' raise a little hell!
That's the trouble with the job; there isn't half the fun
As in days when cow guards had to throw a speedy gun.

Guess I'll hit the blankets till the breakin' o' the day,
Maybe I'll feel better then an' sing along the way,
For a ridin' roamer's lot is elegant an' grand,
An' it takes the lonely spells to make him understand.

Pat Costello.



The Misleading Story

By E. I. LA BEAUME

Author of "Midnight and the Private Car."

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

MR. AND MRS. BUDDINGTON-BROWN, successful feature writers, have made themselves wealthy as publishers. They want to make a great novelist out of their son, Raymond, nicknamed "Buddy"; so they employ him as assistant editor of *Sweet Stories*, one of their magazines. Buddy soon loses the manuscript of "All For Love," a story written by Selma Gault, by leaving it in a subway train, where it is picked up by a shifty looking individual. In order to make amends to this delightful young lady, he offers to help her rewrite the story. As Buddy drives out on Saturday afternoon to where Selma lives with some distant cousins, the Russells, he wonders in a sort of worried way whether Selma is living in the same house with big, good looking Dick Russell, an all-American football star of a few years before.

CHAPTER V (*Continued*).

LIVELY PEOPLE.

THE Russell home was a large and loosely remodeled structure occupying about three acres, with a small strip of waterfront. The original building was a spacious, square farmhouse which had been added to at each end and in the rear, the back part descending in a series of steps, each representing an addition.

Some of the remodeling expressed the ideas of former owners, and for some of it the present occupants were responsible, with the result that much was to be desired architecturally, but very little in the way of comfort.

The Dutch entrance led immediately into a huge living room such as Buddy had never seen before. It took up nearly the whole floor of the original farmhouse, and the second-story rooms had been knocked

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out above it, so that it extended up to the eaves.

At the second story a gallery went around the room, and on two sides and at the rear, hallways and bedrooms opened from this. On each side there was a large fireplace of rough stone mantled by heavy slabs of the same material. Stairways in opposite corners led up to the gallery.

He caught a glimpse of a dining room of almost equally imposing proportions, which occupied most of the right wing, and a billiard room on the left. The furniture was massive and heterogeneous; it was good, though some of it was shabby, and all of it was evidently chosen with the idea of comfort and utility uppermost.

Several bearskins, and one of a large Bengal tiger, mementos of Enoch Russell's marksmanship, were interspersed with rugs from Oriental looms. Antlered trophies of the hunt adorned the walls.

To his surprise and elation, Buddy came through the first literary session with pronounced success. He was only required to read and criticize the new start Selma had made. His criticism, in the form of extravagant praise was accepted as authoritative.

He succeeded in detecting a few misspelled words and typographical errors; and he created a profound impression by the professional way in which he used proofreader's symbols in making these minor corrections.

These symbols called for explanation and he fluently expounded the mystic signs, blessing for the first time the drudgery through which he had so recently acquired this knowledge.

After this they abandoned literature for the day and talked. Selma confided enough of her life's history to stimulate his interest and compassion, and to confirm the estimate he had formed of her on that night when she first occupied his thoughts.

The family didn't sound dangerous, as Selma described them, though his forebodings about Dick were confirmed; he was thankful that they had no literary leanings, and he was glad to learn that he was expected to stay to dinner.

Emma Russell got home first with the announcement that Marge had won the race, and Buddy was charmed at once. She seemed absurdly young to be the mother of five children, and she was decidedly handsome.

Her greeting was so cordial, and her manner to Selma so friendly, that it didn't seem possible she could ever be unkind to her governess. Selma had insisted that all her cousins were lovely to her, but Buddy had refused to believe this until he met Emma.

She was a new type to him, not in the least like the friends of his mother's. Emma was a woman of strange and varied talents. She knew enough about making kites to improve most any small boy's technique, and she could wield a hammer without smashing her thumbs.

In emergencies, she was the family veterinarian, and had practiced with average success upon a long succession of patients including all the common birds and beasts from finches to turkeys, and from white mice to horses. Gold fish and turtles had also benefited by her treatment.

Her latest accomplishment was the Charleston, and if she performed less violently than her children, they maintained that " Mother shakes a wicked hoof."

In a family excelling in games of all kinds, she was the best bridge player. She could watch football and baseball with a good idea of what was going on, and she was the boss gardener. Useless to try to catalogue all her attainments—she shared in all the family's hobbies and had a few private ones of her own.

" There'll be a crowd in to dinner," Emma said. " They picked up some people at the yacht club, and they're bringing them home to celebrate Marge's win. I don't know how many there'll be, but they'll probably be late."

It was nearly eight o'clock when the sound of an approaching motor drew them to the window. Three cars were skimming up the drive.

" They've brought a bunch," said Emma. " I knew they would." And she started for the door.

Genial shouts reached Buddy's ears as he stood with Selma, pretending interest in a print of gentlemen in pink coats on horses,

surrounded by dogs. ' Hey, Emma, what do you think of her? Some sailor! Better than Enoch ever thought of being. It looks as if the Russells would keep the cup in the family, but it isn't fair; there are too many of you. They ought to make a club rule that no more than two Russells are allowed in any race."

They were trooping in, shaking Emma's hands violently. Then there was a louder shout: " Here she comes!"

" That's Marge," Selma told Buddy, as he saw Emma patting a good-looking, blond girl on the back. Enoch Russell came next, a robust main nearing fifty, with a ruddy tan, and four enormous freckles splotching the weather-seared dome of his bald head.

" Mr. Buddington-Brown," Emma called, and the introductions began. He liked the frank, firm pressure in Marge's hand-clasp, and the quick, friendly glance from her light blue eyes.

" We've heard a lot about you," said Enoch. " Glad to see you. We're all low-brows here, except Selma, and we need a little literary atmosphere."

" I'm a low-brow, too," Buddy answered, but he could see that this was attributed to modesty.

" I know all about you," Buddy said when his hand was inclosed in Dick's big muscular fist; and he drew a general laugh when he added: " I'm a Harvard man."

For a second, he looked into Dick's pleasant brown eyes; and in that moment he made sure that Dick was a rival. It would have been difficult to define the manner of arriving at this conviction; but he felt sure that Dick's thoughts were akin to his own. He glanced quickly at Selma, and found her watching. Was she comparing him with Dick?

Wholesale introductions followed. There was Fred Whitlea, on whom he had counted to tell him about Selma, back from his vacation. Buddy greeted him effusively. Next came Fred's brother and a Mrs. Whitlea, who must be their mother, but who might almost be one of their wives.

There were Dick's college room-mate, Ted Shore; the Hornbys, father and mother and two girls; Mr. Carr, Miss Spencer—the names fell upon his ear, were jumbled together in a hopeless tangle as he tried to associate them with the owners of various hands that grasped his, and then faded out completely, leaving him in the midst of a friendly, almost nameless throng.

Large trays of glasses appeared, and two mammoth cocktail shakers. Glasses were raised to Marge; the winner's health was drunk, the winner's mother's, the winner's whole family, the winner the while, acknowledging the tributes banteringly, and unabashed.

Dinner must have been announced, though Buddy didn't hear it in the babble about him. There was a movement toward the dining room, and he found himself between Selma and Marge. There were twenty at the table, and there had been no special preparation for them. Emma hadn't even known how many there would be till they arrived.

Buddy was used to affluence, and a good deal of elegance, at home; but decidedly, such entertaining, in this offhand way he had never seen before.

It didn't seem like entertaining. Selma and Emma, and one other woman were the only ones who were dressed for dinner. None of the men were, and two of them were in knickers. That was the way to do it, Buddy thought. What a relief after his mother's stiff, formal affairs!

Conversation was general at first, chiefly about the afternoon's boat race, and a golf tournament that was coming. Every one but Selma evidently shared a lively interest in such things. It was too bad, Buddy thought, that she didn't play golf or tennis.

" Why is it?" he asked her.

" I'm just not good at such things. I tried to play golf when I first came out here, but I'm impossible. Even Marge admitted it after she'd given me three lessons, and I haven't tried it again since.

" I was brought up in the city, or in big summer hotels. My aunt, who took care of me until she died, never went in for sports, and so I never did as a child. Maybe if I'd started younger, I'd have liked to play."

" Don't you like any kind of athletics?"

" I'm learning to swim."

"Fine, that's my favorite sport."

"Is it really? You must come out for a swim before dinner some week day and we can work on the story afterward."

The prospect was pleasant and he accepted eagerly. His success that afternoon had stilled his fears about posing as a literary advisor.

Marge claimed his attention at this point, and he found her easier to talk to than Selma; she stuck to subjects with which he was familiar, and he didn't have to be constantly on his guard. Still, he didn't want to devote all his time to her. He adopted the policy of listening to Selma, encouraging her to talk, and reserving his chatter for his companion on the other side.

Coffee was served in the billiard room. Buddy was seated between Selma and Emma, and Emma was telling him something of the other guests. Buddy noticed a group of the younger members of the party in animated conference, and from their frequent glances in his direction, he gathered that he was under discussion. Then Marge came, and dragged away Emma, who apologized laughingly for her forced departure.

"Why no," he heard Emma say, "of course he won't mind." And then turning to him she said: "You'd like a riot, wouldn't you?"

Buddy said he liked nothing better, and Emma nodded to the others. In an instant the big living room was in a turmoil. Rugs were swept aside, and furniture was pushed into corners, or carried into the dining room.

It was Buddy's first thought, seeing the room enlarge and spread out vastly as it was emptied, that dancing was projected; but it was difficult to reconcile this with Mrs. Russell's reference to a riot. It must be square dances of some sort, he concluded; but his disillusionment was swift.

A scuffle centered around Enoch Russell. Dick and Marge pinioned his arms, while Fred and Mrs. Whitlea placed a bandage over his eyes. Could it be blind man's buff?

He had little time to wonder, for in the next instant the room was in darkness, and the dark was full of rushing people. It wasn't people only, though; something slid past Buddy with a whirring sound, and bumped against the wall beside him. He put out his hand, and felt a large upholstered chair.

His first thought was that this was childish tomfoolery for grown people to engage in. It had come so suddenly, he had had so little warning of what was afoot, that he could not immediately enter into the spirit of the occasion, and he felt embarrassed. Some one stifled a laugh quite close to him, and he identified it as coming from Marge. Then the lights flashed back.

Most of the company had gained the balcony, and were leaning over the railing. Enoch was groping his way toward one of the stairways, waving his arms crazily in search of a guiding wall that was ten feet away.

Marge darted close to him, and he turned in perilous pursuit. She dodged, and with a whoop of triumph, in which all the watchers in the gallery joined, Mrs. Whitlea sent a leather couch scooting across the floor like a sled on glassy ice.

It caught Enoch at the knees, tumbled him backward, and carried him sprawling across it until it thudded into the opposite wall.

Buddy joined heartily in the gleeful uproar caused by this spectacle. But as Enoch rose to his feet he realized that he was alone with him on the main floor. He had been too engrossed in this startling performance to think about following Marge and Mrs. Whitlea up the stairs.

Now he was conscious of a little thrill of excitement. He saw Emma smiling down at him. Marge and Mrs. Whitlea joined her. They motioned him toward the stairs, and he bounded up. He forgot his first feeling of superiority, and began to relish the play.

He paused for a moment at the top to take in the situation. When he started toward Emma he saw Enoch coming from the opposite direction, and turned to run around the gallery. He was surprised to see that Emma and Marge and Mrs. Whitlea, who were alone on that side, did not follow him.

When he reached the opposite side he paused again to watch them. He saw Enoch

Russell drawing closer; he was almost upon them, when all three climbed nimbly over the railing, dropped to the mantle just below, and thence to the floor. Lengths of silk stockings, a flash of pink bloomers, and there they were laughing up at their pursuer.

And Emma had five children! She must be about as old as his own mother. Dick was certainly as old as he. So was Fred Whitlea, and that was his mother performing acrobatics before his eyes. Some people, thought Buddy! And he blessed the good fortune that had placed Selma in surroundings that promised so much fun.

But he had scant time to marvel. Enoch changed his tactics. With the guard-rail to guide him, he started to run full speed around the gallery. He turned the corner before Buddy realized his peril, and was bearing down upon him.

Others in his path leaped the rail, and hung on the outside until he passed, letting go for a moment and raising their hands in order to avoid Enoch's hand as he slid it along the rail. Buddy followed this example and held his breath until Enoch went by.

He was lucky, for Enoch divined the strategy. He reached out over the railing and caught one of the Hornsby girls, who was next to Buddy.

Buddy noticed, as the game progressed, that Selma did not enter into it with much gusto. She seemed content to keep out of the way, making sure of not being caught by avoiding all daring chances. When the novelty had slightly worn off, he joined her in the billiard room. Several others had deserted the games for billiards, and their places were taken by newcomers.

"I think these are the jolliest people I ever met," said Buddy.

"They're just as nice as they can be," Selma answered. "Didn't I tell you so?"

"You know, after meeting them, it's hard to understand why you don't like it here. I shouldn't think you'd ever want to leave them."

"It is difficult to explain. It sounds foolish, but I sometimes wish they'd be mean to me, so I'd have a better reason for wanting to get away from them—not a better reason, but a more obvious one. Then I wouldn't feel ungrateful.

"I'm sure you understand, though. You seemed to understand from the very first. It's amusing for you here for a change, but think how you'd feel if you had to be with people all the time who don't care anything about the things that mean the most to you.

"Suppose you didn't have any intellectual companionship. You meet interesting people all the time—writers and artists and people who are doing things and thinking things; your mother and father are literary, and you have literary people at home all the time.

"And you have your wonderful work. I think being an editor must be the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Of course, I'm not really literary; I hardly know anything at all; I'm just beginning to appreciate such things, and I want to write more than I ever wanted to do anything.

"So you see it's natural that I should want to be with people who talk about writing and books, and not just about play. Then, aside from that, even if I didn't want to write, I'd want to be independent; I'd want to earn my living."

"But you are earning your living."

"Not really. I may earn the seventy-five dollars-a-month salary; but I don't earn all the other things. Cousin Emma treats me exactly like her daughter. I couldn't begin to live the way I do if I were working as a governess for any one else. Oh, it makes me feel perfectly hateful to talk like that. But you do understand, Mr. Buddington-Brown, don't you?"

"Indeed I do." Buddy wasn't quite sure that he did, but he was certain that she was adorable. "You're a genius; that explains everything."

It was midnight when Buddy started home. Some of the party were gathered about a chafing dish in the dining room, some were playing bridge or billiards. He had been urged to come often by the others as well as by Selma. Would he do it? Where else in the world could he find such a charming and lively group of people?

Through persistent questioning Fanny

Buddington-Brown learned enough to convince her that the Russell influence was not one that she would have chosen for the stimulation of her son's interest in literature. It might be true that Miss Gault was a budding writer, but she suspected that Buddy's interest in her was more sentimental than literary.

"I'm sorry he's started going with that sporting set," she told Farnsworth.

"They're very decent people, I believe," he replied.

"Do you suppose he'll be crazy enough to fall in love?"

"Most of us are, my dear; but I'm sure he must realize that he is not in any position to get married."

"It's this governess business. I hope I'm not a snob, but really, if he has to get mixed up with sporting people and banks, and all that sort of thing—well, I'd rather it would be the daughter than the governess."

"She's a relative, you know."

"You always think everything's all right."

"That's the secret of happiness and success, my love."

"Stuff," said Fanny.

And she gave her son a long dissertation upon the necessity for years of hard work unhampered by distracting entanglements or obligations, if one was to prepare one's self for the glorious business of literature.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOST MANUSCRIPT.

WHILE Selma and Buddy were nurturing their interest in each other over the reconstruction of "All For Love," the original copy was exciting an interest of a different kind.

It was Pinky John who picked up Buddy's discarded newspaper, and furtively pocketed the manuscript folded up in it. He left the subway at Astor Place, and went to Joe Minelli's wine cellar in Sullivan Street.

On the way he speculated hopefully upon the contents of his find, without, however, giving definite form to his expectations. He couldn't put a name to anything worth while that the papers might contain, but he had a feeling about papers. There was something mysterious about so many crisp sheets covered with typewriting; they hinted vaguely of value.

Joe Minelli's wine cellar was an improbable place. You would say upon entering it that it was an exaggerated copy of some stage setting representing the haunt of cutthroats.

You would say, if you saw it reproduced upon the stage, that the scenic artist had let his imagination run past the bounds of plausibility in straining for portentous effect.

If you were above the average height, you ducked your head in going through the door at the foot of a short but steep flight of steps. In the summer this door was kept open, and children playing in Sullivan Street could look in, and see the legs of men who were standing at the small counter to the left of the entrance.

To the neighborhood children there was nothing terrifying about Joe Minelli's; they were sent there often enough to bring home a bottle of red wine; they were familiar with the shadowy twilight of the place and with many of the figures that peopled it.

They were curious only about the small group of white-collar men sitting about a long, narrow table in the darkest corner. These were artists, writers, and Greenwich Village idlers that made artistic pretensions the excuse for idleness.

Children stared at them uncertainly; but the other habitués—Giuseppe, who owned the fruit stand on the corner; old Tony, the carpenter; the rich Mr. Angelo, who never worked, but only collected the rent—were well-known characters whose presence was a guarantee that the place was reputable and safe.

There were stories, to be sure, about the little back room that was the meeting place for Gat Minsk's mob. Children were silent when Gat Minsk went down the street, and when he had passed by they gathered to whisper.

Tiger Roca, because of his name, was even more disquieting to the juvenile in-

habitants of Sullivan Street; but all members of Gat Minsk's mob were given respect except Pinky John.

The more daring ventured "Hello, Pinky," from a safe distance, and it was related how Irish Monahan once threw a rotten potato in his direction.

But, for all the whispering, no one was much alarmed by these desperate characters. People might have their own ideas when the newspapers told of murders and holdups that baffled the police, but they kept them to themselves and admonished less cautious youngsters to shut up.

No one knew anything about these things with certainty, and no one wanted to. Patrons of Joe Minelli's might exchange knowing glances when some one went through to the corridor in the rear, but they never explained their thoughts.

There were newspaper men at the corner table who knew a thing or two, but they restrained their curiosity; the wine was not so bad, and it was very cheap; Joe Minelli was a good scout, so why spoil a good place and make trouble for an affable host?

The three classes that patronized Joe Minelli's kept to themselves; each was accustomed to the presence of the others, and they took each other for granted as they took for granted their improbable surroundings. It was only when some new member of the white-collar group was introduced that the wine cellar received the appreciation it deserved.

To the uninitiated, who faced the gloom on entering from the sunlight or the glare of the street lights, the round cheeses suspended from the ceiling in wicker-mesh bags invariably suggested bombs. The dark-skinned Italian workmen and artisans, hunched upon the narrow benches of rough boards, gave a satisfying impersonation of thieves and gunmen.

The low dresser with a long mirror and a marble top, that served as a rickety seat, contrasted its dilapidated elegance incongruously with the other rude furnishings.

In the winter a big potbellied stove glowed in the center of the room, and always a gas burner flickered under a caldron of onion-laden soup, making the shadows mysterious with its sinister blue flame. Every article in the room, from the huge butcher knife lying on the counter beside a monstrous loaf of bread to the patent clothes-rack with its many bars and slats that looked like the skeleton of some strange beast in the obscurity of an alcove, contributed to the fearsome effect. There were only two conclusions possible to the white-collar man seeing this for the first time; either it was an appalling den of vice frequented by the most lawless and depraved, or it was another Greenwich Village hoax designed and decorated to provide thrills for provincial tourists.

As we have seen, both of these conclusions were wrong. If criminals happened to be hobnobbing in the back room while you sipped your wine with your artist friend, neither you nor old Tony, arguing pleasantly with Mr. Angelo, were any the worse, or any the wiser.

If your friend nudged you and whispered a name as Gat Minsk sauntered through the room, that was all you were likely to see of him.

You might spend all of your evenings at Joe Minelli's without ever hearing anything more alarming than a trivial argument in excited Italian, or seeing anything more disturbing than the feeble resistance of old Tony when Joe insisted that he had drunk enough and must go home.

The privileged reader alone among those outside of Gat Minsk's immediate circle will be allowed to follow Pinky John into the back room. When Pinky entered the cellar, he was glad to learn from Joe that Gat, with whom he had an appointment, had not yet arrived. He went through the room, nodding civilly to several of the company, and into a corridor which led to a courtyard.

On this courtyard were the backs of three buildings fronting on the next street, and those of two other buildings that adjoined the one occupied by Joe Minelli. Thus there were five possible ways to leave, if one did not wish to depart by the way he came in.

There were several doors along the corridor, but Pinky chose the first one on the right. In the room there was one of those long, narrow tables similar to those in the

outer room, made by sticking the ends of four, rough-hewn legs through holes bored slantwise in the top; on each side of this was a bench without any back, and against the whitewashed basement wall was an army cot.

An unshielded electric globe hung from the ceiling, and furnished the only light. A telephone, standing in the corner on the floor, completed the equipment.

Pinky seated himself at the table to make the most of his chance to examine the papers in solitude. He spelled the words painfully, forming each letter with his lips:

> MY HEART'S OWN RAYMOND:
> All night I have been trying to put you out of my sight and out of my mind, to forget the ecstasy of your kisses and the soft thrill of your voice.

He paused in irritation over the unfamiliar words, but at last a leer of comprehension animated his rather vacant countenance; some skirt was yelping at her man:

> Oh, my beloved, I have prayed to God for strength to resist the temptation to commit a hideous act of treachery for your sake.

Reading was an unaccustomed exercise. Printed words produced a blurred impression, and even in this short stretch his mind rebelled at the forced concentration. His attention was wavering, and his resentment was rising against the writer of this incomprehensible mush when the word "commit" revived his interest, and brought a glimmer of recognition to his watery eyes. You committed crimes; he knew something about that.

But what was all this?—"a hideous act of treachery?"—"act," yes—"treachery," he recognized it uncertainly—but, "hideous"? He'd never heard of it. What did people want to write that way for? He pondered this till his mind wandered, then gave it up, and tried to continue.

But it got worse and worse. A sullen anger overcame him, and he was about to vent it by tearing the papers, when he heard the door to the corridor open and Gat's voice calling an order to Joe.

At this he put the manuscript back into his pocket with the same sly expression that followed his discovery in the subway. When he was sober, caution was instinctive with Pinky, though his companions called this trait by a more unpleasant name.

They always took care that he was thoroughly hopped when he was needed on professional duties that called for daring. Yet even with the artificial courage inspired by cocaine, Pinky was the least considered member of Gat Minsk's mob.

He might attain recklessness, but no amount of drugs could lend him the ability to think straight and quickly in an emergency.

The criminologists that believe all criminals are the result of environment rather than of a natural disposition toward lawlessness, would have seized upon Pinky as an ideal example to prove their case. It would be difficult to find one less fortunately endowed for gaining a livelihood by his wits; and yet Pinky had never contemplated any other means of existence.

From his earliest days on the streets he had been the ineffectual member of some outlaw band, always the one to be thrown overboard when a sacrifice was necessary to cover the escape of the rest. It was Pinky who howled cravenly under the blows of angry peddlers and small shopkeepers while his friends escaped with the booty; and later it was he who faced the judge, and paid the penalty for more serious transgressions.

A full half of the ten years since he was eighteen he had spent up the river, and usually he went up alone. This experience had taught him one thing: caution is perhaps not the best word; he was universally and comprehensively suspicious.

His distrust was uncontrollable and invariable, but he did not have the wit or the courage to protect himself against the betrayals that he foresaw so accurately.

Gat Minsk presented a striking contrast to the irresclute Pinky; and Tiger Roca, who followed him into the room, exemplified a type that was different from either.

Gat was short and slender, and his movements were quick and alert. He wore a blue serge suit, a cream-colored silk shirt, and a dark blue cravat. A diamond of impressive size that flashed upon his left

hand was the only departure from ostentatious simplicity. His face was long and narrow, and his features gave clear evidence of Semitic origin.

Pinky was taller, though not above medium height, and was equally thin. His pale blue eyes looked shiftily through inflamed lids; his skin looked more than ordinarily white beside his swarthy companions', and his light red hair, which accounted for his name, was sallow beside their silky black locks. His greeting was both deprecating and petulant.

"Good man," said Gat. "Glad you're here on time."

"Hello," was all the Tiger said, but he put a world of disdain into his voice.

At first glance Tiger Roca made both the others dwindle into insignificance by his size and vitality, and by the brilliance of his attire. His light brown suit and purple-striped shirt seemed the natural thing for so vigorous a personality.

Where Gat wore one diamond, he displayed two, and a third glittered against his brightly variegated cravat. His carriage and his movements told of prodigious muscular development. His mouth was cruel, his eyes set wide in an oval face with a long and prominent chin. It was by comparing these eyes with Gat's that you formed a true estimate of the two.

Roca's eyes were bold, but without depth; Gat's were deep, cunning, almost thoughtful. In this trio you saw the planner, the killer, and the dupe.

Gat explained that a job was afoot. Over the grappa that Joe passed through the door he outlined plans, and gave instructions. He produced the drug that was to make a lion out of the cowering Pinky. But before it took effect he made the dire threats that never failed to terrify.

Pinky knew that they were not idle threats; he knew that the penalty for any serious blunder would probably be death; he suspected that Tiger Roca would enjoy inflicting it.

The work in hand took Gat's mob to Moe Rosen's jewelry store in Harlem. It was carried through successfully, and afterward Pinky John knew little of what happened for some time. There was money to spend, and there was the necessity of keeping hopped, of deferring as long as possible the sickening moment when he would find himself dependent upon his own shattered physical forces without artificial stimulant.

For days and nights he lived in a fantastic world, and moved among fantastic, half-real people. He moved among them as an equal—didn't he have money?—and for a time he was able to forget to cringe. He even forgot that every one was an enemy to be profoundly mistrusted.

These were the times for which Pinky John lived. It was only during such periods that he felt himself a man, and gave his self-esteem the nourishment it craved.

But it couldn't last forever. The pleasant friends he forgot to distrust would see to that, no matter how large his wad might be. Besides, it didn't suit Gat Minsk's plans to have one of his aids always in a completely helpless condition.

Pinky would have to come out of this, and sleep. He would have to attain sobriety before another shot could fit him for another job.

One Friday morning Tiger Roca carried him through the deserted wine cellar, flopped him on the cot in the back room, and, after making sure that neither drugs nor money were concealed about him, locked him in.

"He'll be crazy all day," the Tiger reported to Gat, "but by night he ought to sleep, and to-morrow he'll be sick as hell."

This prediction was fairly accurate. It was late in the afternoon on that Saturday when Buddy made his first visit to Winship, that Gat and Tiger Roca went to look at Pinky.

Gat swore in an even voice when he saw the stricken wreck huddled lifelessly on the cot, pronouncing the foulest epithets, and the most profane blasphemies with a cold, emotional vindictiveness.

Tiger Roca, who had been keeping sober by drinking wine instead of his usual brandy, and who had succeeded in getting half a skinful, thought to supplement his leader's verbal attack with more forthright measures.

But Gat stopped him angrily as he started to lay hands upon the inert Pinky. Gat was furious because he had underestimated the time needed for Pinky's recovery, but he didn't want this delayed still more by rough treatment.

He wanted to use Pinky on the following Monday, needed him badly, in fact; he knew that Sam Kleabaum would be away on that day, and this presented an especially good opportunity for robbing his store; but he hesitated to take the risk without a dumb-bell like Pinky, who could safely be made the goat in case of trouble.

And such dumb-bells were difficult to find. Usually, if a man was good enough to be in the business, you couldn't go too far in double crossing him. If he thought you were trying to get away with anything he'd squawk, and take a chance on getting bumped off.

But not Pinky; he'd let them hang him before he'd dare peep. That's why the prudent Minsk wanted Pinky on the job; he served as a kind of liability insurance.

Yet to Gat's practiced eye it was evident that it would take the better part of a week for Pinky to recover. He had let him stay on the stuff too long. And so he sat and swore lurid oaths, while the tipsy Tiger Roca grinned stupidly, relapsing finally into deep thought.

As this silent meditation continued, the Tiger grew restless and resentful. It annoyed him to see any one indulging in mental exercise of which he was incapable; he thought it was a stall anyway.

But the more Gat considered the situation, the less he liked the thought of tackling Kleabaum's without Pinky. The trouble was, the mob was raring to go. Rosen's had only netted seven thousand, and it was already gone. If he didn't dig up something for them soon his leadership would suffer, and he hadn't a thing but Kleabaum's in immediate prospect.

No solution of the difficulty came to him, and at last, noting Roca's discontent, he gave it up and ordered drinks. The Tiger was cheered by this, and he expressed the opinion that they wouldn't need Pinky for Kleabaum's.

Gat frowned, and stared gloomily at Pinky for an answer. He didn't find it, but a diversion suggested itself.

"Frisk him," he commanded.

"He ain't got nothing," Roca answered. "I went through him."

"Frisk him," Gat repeated.

The Tiger obeyed, and Selma's story came to light along with a penknife, a vanity case, tender memento of some amorous passage, several soiled handkerchiefs, and a depleted package of cigarettes. Gat picked up the manuscript, puzzled for a moment over the title and the salutation, and then plunged into the story.

He was not an experienced reader of the higher forms of literature, but at least he read the tabloids; and, although he was as much at sea about the meanings of many of the words as Pinky had been, he made better progress.

At first his interest was simulated to prevent the Tiger from continuing his troublesome questions about Kleabaum's. Soon, however, he became as genuinely absorbed as Buddy had been.

The Tiger watched in silence for ten minutes; then, estimating from the imposing sheaf of unread pages that the reading was likely to take a long time, he took off his coat, shoved Pinky's limp body against the wall, lay down beside him, and was soon asleep.

As Gat got farther into the story he saw the way out of his embarrassment. When he finished, he went back and reread certain parts with close attention. He studied the address in the upper right hand corner of the first page. "Winship," he said, "that's out near Stamford."

Roca opened his eyes reluctantly when Gat shook him. "What's matter?" he asked sleepily.

"Kleabaum's is off."

The Tiger sat up, and faced his chief belligerently. "How come, off?"

"Got something better."

"What's the lay?" the Tiger asked suspiciously.

"It's like this, see," tapping the manuscript, "there's a broad pulling an inside job for her man, see? This here's a letter that gives him all the dope; gives him the whole lay, see?"

Gat shoved the manuscript at Roca, and pointed to the place. With occasional promptings from Gat he read stumblingly:

"I will do what you ask, because I can refuse you nothing. I would rather live a life of shame with you than follow the paths of virtue without you. God pity me for saying such a wicked thing, but it's true."

"What the hell?" asked the Tiger, looking up in disgust.

"Keep going," Gat ordered.

"You ask me for complete directions, and I will try to give them to you. Do not be angry with me if I fail to tell you all the things. Remember that this is the first time I ever tried to do such a thing, and my inexperience may lead me into error."

Again Roca looked up in sullen protest, and once more he was commanded to continue.

"You know where my room is located. There is one window in the front, the last one toward the corner of the left wing, and another one on the side of the house. Thursday, the twenty-second, will be the best day, because some of the servants will be away."

The reader's voice became more assured, and a ring of interest came into it as he went on:

"They do not return until the next morning. Usually every one is in bed by eleven o'clock unless there is company, or unless they go out. I do not think there would be any use to come before twelve. Then you will not have so long to wait in an agony of suspense. Oh, my sweetheart, I should be terrified."

This was too much. They exchanged appreciative grins, and the Tiger muttered obscenities in Sicilian dialect. "Who is this guy?" he asked.

"Name's Raymond; my heart's own Raymond. Know any guy named Ray?"

Roca shook his head, and went back to "All For Love."

"If you are nervous, think how much more so I shall be. I shall be so frightened I fear I shall swoon."

"Pass out," Gat explained as the Tiger stopped in exasperation, after repeating the last word several times. "Don't keep stopping; push along."

"Why don't she say, 'pass out,' if that's what she means. You do the book stuff. Put me wise to what she's spilling."

Gat took up the reading:

"Wouldn't it be terrible, dear, if you should have to devote yourself entirely to me? If I should be a burden instead of a help? I will not fail you, but do not be cross with me if I am foolish. Remember that I am giving up everything for you. That's not a reproach. I do it gladly. There is nothing I would not do for your dear sake.

"But I am digressing, dear. Why can I not explain the situation simply, in a few words?"

"That's what I say," Roca interrupted. Gat answered, "She's going to tell you," and went on:

"It's because my heart's so full of you it will not allow me to think of other things."

The Tiger's language was unprintable, and so loud that Gat had to raise his voice.

"I must try again. I shall keep a light in my room until I am sure that every one has retired. They are all sound sleepers. When my light is extinguished, it will be safe for you to climb onto the roof of the little side porch below my window.

"Don't fall, darling; and be as noiseless as you can. But there, you will say I am silly to tell you things like that."

"I'll say he will," fervently from Gat.

"You say I can give you further directions about the house, and where the things are kept, when you are in my room; but I think it will be safer to write everything down now. I may be so agitated upon that fatal night that I would neglect something.

"The hall from my room leads to the gallery around the living room that I have described to you. It is a most unusual house. I don't know whether I told you that the daughter has a chamber next to mine. Beyond that are the master apartments.

"Madam has very beautiful jewels. When she takes them off at night she usually puts them in a case, which she leaves upon her dressing table, but I hope I can dissuade you from entering those chambers. I tremble to think of your running into such danger for the sake of a few trinkets, no matter what their value.

"All the silver is left out in the dining

room, or in the pantry. I went downstairs last night after all had retired to see if any one would hear me. I would have said I was looking for a book if I had been discovered, but all was quiet. I picked up a silver pitcher, and put it back. It gave me a horrible feeling of guilt and shame. You can park your car in the shadow of the trees about a quarter of a mile from the house toward the main road.

"Darling, how I shudder to think what I am doing. I gladly give up all for you, but sometimes I wonder what the future holds in store for me. Will you always be good and kind to me? Don't think I doubt you. Have I not your assurance that you love me? How it thrills me to write that!"

Gat paused and glanced over the remainder. "That's all that's any good. Wonder where Pinky got it."

"I'll bet he don't know. But whatcha mean, Kleabaum's is off? This ain't as good as Kleabaum's."

"Kleabaum's 'll wait. It ain't going to close up, and this has gotta be pulled on the twenty-second."

"When is the twenty-second?"

"It's a week from next Thursday, and that ain't any too long to get the lowdown on this layout."

"A week from Thursday! And this only Saturday! Ain't Kleabaum going away Monday? Sure, he ain't going to close up, but we don't know when he'll be away again. I don't getcha—wanting to pass up a good job to go housebreaking after some tin dishes, and a few sparklers. Whatcha holding out on me?"

Gat felt that his position was weak. He had banked too heavily upon the Tiger's dull wit. But he knew that his real reason for delay would be even less acceptable than the one he was trying to put over.

None of the mob would admit the necessity for having Pinky along. He decided to appeal to the superstition that was strong in Roca. "I got a hunch about this. Look how it come to us. It's a handout. You don't want to be kicking a thing like that in the face."

"I never said nothing about kicking it in the face. 'S'all right with me to pull that job, too. But I don't get why we should pass up Kleabaum's. Say, what the hell?"

A phase of the situation he had failed to consider burst upon Roca. He assumed a superior tone that was unusual and disconcerting. "That letter ain't to Pinky. How about that heart's-own-Raymond guy? How do we horn in on this?"

Roca was not capable of handling more than one thought at a time. It was his preoccupation with the Kleabaum affair that led him into this bit of stupidity.

Gat was instantly relieved when he understood what the other was driving at. Here was an opportunity to reassert himself, and put his lieutenant back into his subservient position. His disgust was first expressed in well-chosen oaths, and then:

"Whatja think? I was going to ask him for an invitation to the party? Or maybe you thought I'd try to beat him to it. You ought to go back to selling bananas. It's all bone.

"Give you a tip that's sure and safe, and you don't see it. You can't wait for it. You gotta go pulling another job first, and then maybe have to lay low till the safe one's all over. Sure, it's the excitement you want; you don't give a damn for easy money, do you?"

"I gotcha, I gotcha; can that stuff," muttered Roca, alive at last to his blunder.

But Gat was not to be stopped from rubbing it in. "You don't get nothing that ain't spelled out for you. We'll highjack that guy—see? 'Ja ever hear of that? We'll let him get the stuff, and then we'll ask him for it—see? He won't squawk—see? Because he won't want to explain how he got the stuff—see?"

The Tiger endured this sarcasm sullenly. There was no answer; he'd been dumb, but this knowledge did not improve his humor. He wanted to bully somebody, and he naturally turned toward Pinky. They had forgotten him in the heat of discussion. Gat saw a look of surprise on the Tiger's face, and he too looked in that direction.

Pinky was watching them with an expression that was disquietingly venomous, disquieting because of its incongruity. One who was unfamiliar with sickness of this kind would have said he was at the point

of death; his pallor was the pallor of death; his lips were a greenish blue; his eyes were glazed, and were circled with the same lifeless shade.

Any expression of strong emotion, coupled with this moribund appearance, would have been terrifying; but this expression of hate was shocking by its unseemliness. Used as they were to the raw and brutal aspects of humanity, Minsk and Roca were put out of countenance. Their eyes sought each other's for assurance.

When Pinky spoke, his first words came in a whisper, then changed to a hoarse uncertain rattle when he tried impotently for a normal pitch of sound. With the effort, his vitiated body shook and jerked spasmodically. "Frisked me when I passed out, did you, eh? That's the kind of pals you are."

Gat was the first to compose himself for the attack. "What do you expect when you hold out on us? Didja think you was going to pull this job alone?"

Already the mental exertion was too much for Pinky. The vindictive gleam faded from his eyes, and a look of frightened entreaty took its place. "Gimme a shot, Gat. I didn't mean nothing. My Lawd, I gotta have a shot!"

Roca broke in roughly: "A shot, hell! You gotta come out of this. You gotta ease off it—see? Here, try this."

He poured out a heavy slug of grappa, and Pinky swallowed it avidly. "More." The word was smothered in a choking cough. Gat nodded in answer to the Tiger's inquiring glance, and Roca refilled the glass.

Spots of red appeared on Pinky's cheek bones. His trembling slackened, and he lay relaxed, breathing heavily. He had got little meaning from what he heard of the discussion over the manuscript. He had realized dimly that it was his property, and that it had been stolen from him. Now he remembered that it was worthless. A foolish smile distorted his flaccid mouth. "Thought you put something over on me, didja? That ain't no good. Some broad yelping for her man."

Gat looked at him sharply. Usually Pinky's countenance was easy to read. But his facial muscles were now so far out of control that it revealed nothing intelligible. However, it was not incredible that Pinky had failed to read the letter, or that, having read it, he had failed to understand it. "Where'd you get it?"

Pinky searched a long time among the scattered refuse of his memory before replying: "Subway seat."

"When?"

Another long pause, during which the effort was nearly abandoned; it was difficult to recall definitely anything that had ever happened. "Day we cracked Rosen's. How long ago's that?"

He heard without surprise that nearly two weeks had passed since his last lucid moments. It made not a particle of difference. The question had been automatic. It was forgotten almost as soon as it was spoken.

"Didn't you read it?" Gat asked.

"Read some. Don't wanta read it—all slop—some broad yelping—"

"Yeh, we heardja the first time," Gat interrupted, and proceeded to explain the true significance of the letter. Pinky understood it well enough to reassert his proprietary rights whiningly.

"You're a fine guy to crab about that," said Gat. "If we hadn't frisked you, what good would it done you? You'd 'a' thrown it away, or kept it in your pocket till too late. You'd ought to thank us. Tell you what, we'll pull this job alone—see? Just us three.

"You tip the mob," turning to Roca, "that Kleabaum's is off. Tell 'em the bulls has got a steer. Say I'm working on something else; something big—see? I'll stick around Winship awhile and get the lay."

Pinky was mollified by this implied promise of a three-way split, and promptly fell asleep; but Roca, who had been examining the manuscript, was still in an objecting mood.

"Now, look here! This ain't a regular letter. It's got this name, Selma Gault, at the top. Regular letters is signed at the end."

"Not long ones like that," Gat answered patronizingly, restored to full confidence

in his leadership. "Do you think anybody would read all that before they found out who wrote it?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BATTLE OF GIANTS.

MEANWHILE, on several visits to Winship, Buddy came through the literary ordeal successfully, but finally he struck heavy going.

Selma greeted him. "I'm stalled, and I need your advice. I think Minerva said some pretty mean things about my story. I do so want you to meet Minerva; she's my best friend, and she knows a lot, but sometimes I get provoked at her.

"I didn't let her see 'All For Love.' I had a kind of feeling about it, she's so critical; but last night she read a little of it that I had just done, and she said it was full of *clichés*. And what do you think? You wouldn't believe it, but I didn't know what she meant."

Buddy could easily believe it. What the devil were *clichés?* He must feel his way carefully through this perilous situation. But as Selma continued, the mystery was resolved, and his anxiety was relieved.

"I didn't let her know it, though, because when she told what some of them were I saw that she meant trite expressions. At least, that's what Professor Bibble calls them, but maybe you call them *clichés.*"

Buddy disclaimed this, assuring her of his preference for "trite expressions."

She seemed gratified by this justification of the professor. "Of course I knew it couldn't have been that way the first time I wrote it, or you would have noticed it, but I'm afraid I haven't done it as well."

"Let's see the part she read. She may possibly be right, but I doubt it."

Selma eased the situation still more as she handed him the papers. Up to that time she was a little vague about the meaning of "trite." "I don't remember all the things she criticized; but I remember she said 'path of virtue' was a *cliché,* and 'agony of suspense,' and 'fatal night.' She said 'fatal night' was pure Laura Jean Libbey.

"I'm sure I don't know what she meant by that, but I suppose you do. Do you think those things are so terrible? Professor Bibble is against trite expressions, and I know an author ought to think up original ways to say things; still you can't always think up new words. What kind of a night would you say, if not 'fatal'? You can't make up words, can you?"

Buddy assured her that you could not. "Nobody would understand them if you did," he added logically. "But I can tell better about this when I read it."

As he frowned over the manuscript, his attention wandered. This Minerva was a dangerous person. From all accounts, she was the only one in Selma's circle who was likely to trip him, and he made up his mind to avoid her if possible.

It might not be possible, however, and if he upheld Selma's use of "fatal night," he might later be called upon to sustain his position in debate with Minerva. He had no illusions as to who would triumph in such an encounter, and he saw himself unmasked and humiliated.

Now that he had established a literary reputation by grace of good fortune, he wished to maintain it. Selma's faith in him was sweet to his self-esteem; if it were destroyed she might cease to like him; certainly it would put an end to the intimate association of collaboration.

Better allow Minerva her *clichés,* or whatever you called them, even at the cost of hurting Selma's feelings. But perhaps he could compromise; at any rate, he could temporize. "I wouldn't worry about the *clichés,*" he said, looking up with a reassuring smile.

"Then Minerva was right? Do I use expressions that are worn out and broken down?"

"Don't pay any attention to Minerva. Technically she is right; strictly speaking, some of those things are *clichés,* but it really doesn't make any difference. Writers aren't paying so much much attention to that sort of thing any more, if you know what I mean."

He was sorry for this positive statement as soon as it was out. He hadn't meant to say anything definite that could be

checked up; and now, for all he knew, he might have said something so foolish that Selma herself would pierce his sham, let alone Minerva.

But she was following his words with an expression of interest and complete innocence. He might as well go through with it; no use trying to recall his words. Boldness might win. "As long as you've got a gripping story you don't have to bother about anything else. It's the punch that counts."

"Wouldn't you even change 'fatal night'?"

"I certainly would not." Far better stick to it than be asked to supply a better way to say it.

"I guess that will settle Minerva, coming straight from a real editor." Selma's satisfaction, he foresaw, would lead to difficulties.

"Oh, she's right theoretically," he said. "I don't believe I'd try to argue it with her."

Selma laughed. "I can't argue with Minerva; that's why I'm so anxious to have you meet her. I want to see how she'll talk to a person who knows more than she does. But now we've got some real work; I haven't told you the worst yet. I've finished the story, and I've got it all wrong."

"I don't believe it."

"You will when you see it. I can't get it right, and I've worked at it so much that I'm sick and tired of it. I think maybe that's the reason; I can't seem to get interested in it any more. You said you could remember it, and it would be perfectly sweet of you if you'd fix up the last five or six pages."

Buddy read them, and could not but see that she was right. The admission was awkward, as it left him no escape from his foolish promise, but he knew he could not make a denial that it was bad sound plausible. Her opinion of his critical judgment would be ruined.

There was nothing for it but to accept the task, and Selma left him in a corner of the billiard room, which she had arranged for their editorial conferences, promising that there would be no one to disturb his labors. He looked at the typewriter morosely.

Never having written a line on one, it was plain that he couldn't attempt it now. He examined the keyboard, and found that the letters were arranged without any reference to the normal sequence of the alphabet. He would have to explain that he always wrote long-hand, and that would seem strange for an editor.

When Selma returned two hours later, she found him biting a pencil, and staring at a sheet on which little had been written, and that was ruthlessly crossed out. She laughed. "Why, you look just like me. That's the way I write, but I thought you'd sail right through it. I wondered why I didn't hear the typewriter."

"It's that way with every one, or rather—" There was another unsafe assertion that must be qualified. "—many writers are that way. Sometimes you can't do a thing. As a matter of fact though, I do very little writing myself."

"But this is editing, what you do all the time."

"Yes, but I don't have stories like this all the time. I'm so afraid that I won't make it sound like you. It's not right for me to be monkeying with this. You really oughtn't to let any one else touch it. You'll get it right if you stick to it."

She was disappointed, he saw, and he sought a way to please her. "If this was a common, every-day story, the kind we get bales of, I'd straighten it out without giving it a thought. You can't realize that you've written something really big.

"I can't possibly do anything like that; I thought I could remember what you said, it made such a vivid impression on me, but gosh, it's impossible. I'd spoil it."

"You know that's not true; you oughtn't to flatter me like that. As if you couldn't write lots better than I can." But his words were balm none the less. It was just simply too wonderful. She a great writer!

As Buddy saw the ecstatic, far-away look, and the happy little smile that marked the success of his conciliatory effort, he felt a sudden qualm. Suppose he were wrong. What did he know about

stories? It would be criminal to raise her hopes falsely.

For an instant he despised himself, felt sick with remorse; but then he remembered the great emotional disturbance that "All For Love" had caused in him, and he knew he could not be mistaken.

They were all in the living room after dinner when Minerva arrived. During her visits the Russells usually left the two girls to themselves, but to-night, because of Buddy's presence, they made one group, and for awhile, the dinner table conversation was continued, much to Buddy's satisfaction.

He eyed Minerva suspiciously, and found nothing reassuring in her supercilious silence. Selma, too, noticed that Minerva listened somewhat disdainfully to Buddy's long account of how he once played the last hole at Wykagyl; she wished they might be alone, so that the talk might be shifted, as Minerva would say, to a more civilized plane.

Presently Marge left to dance at the country club, and Emma and Enoch decided upon a game of billiards. As Dick showed no inclination to abandon the field to his rival, Selma reconciled herself to the rôle of keeping him quiet during the feast of wit and wisdom she believed to be preparing.

This proved unexpectedly difficult, however, for the rivals temporarily became allies, and seemed bent upon holding the conversational field against all comers.

Although Buddy was less certain than Dick that he actually had a rival, his natural instinct was antipathetic; but, by burying the hatchet he saw a chance to make one enemy serve as a shield and buckler against another, and momentarily a more dangerous one.

Dismayed at the steady flow of sporting lore, and Minerva's unconcealed boredom, Selma tried to break down the masculine defense. "Oh, Minerva, Mr. Buddington-Brown says that authors aren't paying so much attention to *clichés* any more."

"Yes?" questioned Minerva coldly, turning a hostile glance toward Buddy, who must have failed to hear, for he plunged desperately ahead with his contention that Richards would certainly beat Tilden in the Nationals, supporting it with detailed analysis of point scores in various matches.

Dick chuckled inwardly at this, and joined more enthusiastically than before in the contest; knowing Minerva, he felt sure that she was dying to get to the center of the stage. Once she got there, he knew he would be doomed to listen to a lot of dully intellectual palaver, and he could not help admitting to himself that it was clever of Buddy to size her up so quickly.

At first he was not certain that Buddy was conscious of what he was doing, but after the way he ignored that questioning "Yes?" there could be no doubt about it; the bird had a head on him. Could Dick have known that Buddy was not fighting to escape the remarks of an opinionated young woman, but to save himself from humiliation before Selma—a humiliation which would be doubly painful because he, too, the rival, would witness it—how he would have cursed his own stupidity for abetting the plan.

But forces beyond masculine control were on Dick's side—impossible undertaking for two such inexperienced youths to keep Minerva Cline from having her say.

Minerva smiled enigmatically at Selma when Buddy failed to take up her challenge. She was glad of an opportunity to study this young man about whom she had heard such remarkable things. Though she didn't know it, she was already jealous of him, because he was replacing her in her mental dominance over Selma.

She didn't recognize the type Selma had described in this collegiate person who discoursed vapidly of inconsequential things. Still, you couldn't always tell, and then there was hardly any doubt about his being an editor.

She didn't quite know whether she wanted to impress him favorably, or to prove to Selma that he was not the intellectual giant she supposed. At any rate, she was not in the least dismayed; he didn't seem formidable; she would try him out.

"I wish you'd stop talking that rot." She cut in boldly while Dick was forecasting the respective strengths of Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, for the next football season.

"I was rather anxious to get the inside dope," Buddy answered valiantly, "and Mr. Russell seems to have it. Couldn't you stand a little more?"

"Dick will be glad to give it to you any time you'll listen." Minerva was as relentless and unswerving as a swarm of locusts. "You'll put Selma and me to sleep if you keep it up a minute longer. How's the story going, Selma?"

Buddy realized that he was beaten, and Dick, in his ignorance, believed he shared in the defeat. Selma rose happily to the occasion, though she thought Minerva had been needlessly brusque. "Mr. Buddington-Brown says the sweetest things about it; it's all fixed but the end; I've got to do the last five pages again."

"Selma tells me that you are helping her with it. It's pretty soft, having the editor working with you; he could scarcely help taking it." This was said in a tone of sprightly bantering that could hardly give offense, but it irritated Buddy.

"The story was practically accepted before I met Miss Gault," he replied with dignity. "And besides I'm not *the* editor, I'm only one of the editors."

"That's very interesting to me," Minerva confided. "I thought only *the* editor could accept stories."

"That's right," Buddy admitted, "but with a story like Miss Gault's, there isn't any doubt about its acceptance."

"It's the most remarkable thing I ever heard of." Minerva seemed to be talking to herself, musing: "It's practically her first story; she never thought about writing till a short time ago; she's had no training for it to amount to anything; that correspondence business is utter nonsense; she's not the type of person you'd expect to do anything vital; and yet—" Here she abandoned her dreamy tone, and turned on Buddy like a cross-examiner—"you say, according to Selma, that she has written a masterpiece."

Buddy's antagonism was thoroughly aroused. In his desire to squelch this impertinence he was betrayed into a vernacular so inadequate that even Dick noticed it. "You've got me absolutely right, and—and I don't mean maybe!"

Not willing to let the defense rest there, Dick added: "There's nothing surprising about it; I always knew Selma had the stuff."

Minerva disposed of these remarks with a raise of the eyebrows, and addressed herself to Selma. "My dear, you must know as well as anybody that the whole thing is fantastic. I'm not saying it isn't true. I'm sure no one will be more pleased than I at your success. I naturally would be.

"Didn't I put the idea in your head? Didn't I tell you I thought you might be able to do popular things? That's why I'm so interested; I feel as though I were partly responsible, and I naturally want to find out all about it. You mustn't be sensitive."

"I'm not," Selma protested with a catch in her voice that contradicted her words. Things weren't going at all as she had expected. What was the matter with Minerva? Why was she so disagreeable, and why didn't Mr. Buddington-Brown stand up to her? Her evening was being spoiled.

Minerva turned again to Buddy, sitting helplessly, waiting for the blow. "I haven't read the story, you know—just saw a little of the patched-up one. Selma couldn't wait, she was in such a rush to send it off. She won't even tell me about it. What kind of thing is it, what *genre?*"

Buddy parried weakly: "How do you mean? I don't get you."

There was a hint of the kindly schoolteacher with a backward pupil as she explained. "I mean, was it realistic, romantic, fanciful; or was it one of those plot things? Surely you can put it in some category."

"It was realistic, all right; it was the most realistic thing you ever read, and it was romantic, too." A happy juxtaposition of words flashed into his mind, dug up from some classroom memory. "It was romantic realism," he said triumphantly.

He had spoken haltingly, uncertainly, at first; and to Selma and Dick, listening, it was painful, as when an actor forgets his lines, or a singer gets hopelessly off the key. Yet, while both shared the embarrassment of the moment, it was with quite different sympathies.

It dawned upon Dick for the first time

that Minerva, much as he disliked her, might do him a great service. It was an equally startling, and far less pleasing revelation to Selma, that her new idol was no match for her dogmatic friend.

But when Buddy ceased to flounder, when he tossed out that descriptive tag, "romantic realism," so satisfying to the ear, and so suggestive of possible meaning, Dick involuntarily experienced the same jubilation that Selma felt.

Instinctively, he recognized a certain kinship with Buddy in his dilemma, and his antagonism for Minerva asserted itself, momentarily at least, above this other antagonism. "Atta boy," he encouraged.

"It would be romantic, of course." Minerva smiled coyly at Selma. "But realism? Are you using realism in the modern sense?"

Wearily Buddy faced his antagonist. Why had he ever let himself in for anything like this? That's what came of mixing up with that damn literary rot. It was all the fault of his father and mother. And yet, if they hadn't persuaded him, he wouldn't have met Selma.

Well, if he got through this without completely losing her esteem, he would set her straight at the first opportunity. He wouldn't masquerade before her any more. "Certainly I'm using 'realism' in its modern sense," he replied with shaky assurance.

"Still, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to explain what you mean by it; it's so easy to get confused if you don't define terms."

"Why, by realism I mean—of course, realism always means—when I say 'realism,' the idea I have in mind—" Buddy's sense of humor came to his rescue. He found himself about to chuckle.

He glanced at Selma and Dick, sitting tense, with tortured expressions, and grinned broadly. He stuck his head out at them, and closed one eye in a slow and labored wink. "If you get me, Miss Cline, when I say 'realism,' what I really mean is—" (dramatic pause) "'realism.'"

The tension was shattered. Dick doubled up in boisterous delight; Buddy, trying hard to preserve his solemnity, tittered; Selma controlled herself for an instant out of consideration for Minerva, but when Buddy broke down, she joined her convulsive laughter to the chorus.

It was too delicious. He had been poking fun at Minerva all the time. It was cruel, but wasn't he clever? It served her right; she had brought it upon herself by her insufferable manner; she had been almost insulting.

Through this outburst, Minerva maintained an admirable composure. She laughed a little herself, pleasantly, goodhumoredly, but with no abandon. "I can't see what's the matter with you crazy people," she said mildly. "What's so excruciatingly funny in that? Mr. Buddington-Brown, you have a very appreciative audience."

"I'm sorry," Buddy said. "It wasn't very nice of me, and I agree that it wasn't really funny." During the respite, he had been thinking, had hit upon another life-saving idea. He'd get ahead of that meddler yet.

"The thing of it is," he continued, "I know it makes Miss Gault feel uncomfortable to have us talk about her story. I can see that she doesn't like it, and I think we ought to respect her feelings. That's why I wouldn't be serious. I should have said I didn't want to talk about it in the beginning."

"That's true," Selma backed him up; but had she thought about it deeply she might not have been certain whether it was true or whether her partisanship prompted this support. "I think it was very considerate of you." She was sure of this; it was another example of his sympathetic insight into her nature.

Dick didn't know whether to believe it or not, but he saw that Buddy had scored, and his allegiance switched back again to Minerva. He didn't think that bird knew so much, and he wished she would show him up.

The indomitable Miss Cline was baffled by Buddy's maneuver, but as she had less personal interest than the others in the outcome of this tilt, and was perfectly confident that her own prestige would not suffer, she went back to her baiting deliberately, unflurried.

"By all means, let's not talk about

Selma's story if it makes her uncomfortable. You should have stopped me, my dear. Mr. Buddington-Brown, I've been wanting to ask you what you think of the ultramodernists—Dadaism, Imagism, and all that."

Good Lord! Here was something worse than realism; at least that word suggested a clew to its probable meaning. But Dadaism, Imagism? Where did the woman dig up such stuff? It would take some squirming to get around that; he looked off into space, his youthful countenance contorted to indicate serious thought. "Honestly, Miss Cline"—spoken with judicial impressiveness—"I don't know what to think."

Minerva laughed merrily, ingratiatingly. "Is it as bad as that? I didn't think you would care much for Gertrude Stein; *Sweet Stories* could hardly go in for that sort of thing. But if you want my opinion, I believe we ought to give them a chance.

"We must remember that every innovation is laughed at in the beginning; the innovators may go too far at first, but we should try to understand what they are trying to do. They may have something worth while to contribute, you know. It's not fair to dismiss them without a hearing; have you read much of the modern stuff?"

"Not a great deal," Buddy admitted.

"There you are; you're an editor, and you haven't even tried to find out what it's all about. Just what have you read?"

Buddy appeared to be trying to recall something that was on the tip of his tongue, but he gave it up. "I can't remember the name of a thing."

Minerva cast an oblique and meaningful glance at Selma and Dick, to whom all this was as abstruse as it was to Buddy, but she did not press the point.

"There's another thing I've always wanted to ask about." Buddy acknowledged this with an assumption of gracious interest that he was far from feeling. Still, a new subject could hardly be worse.

Covertly he consulted his wrist watch, and learned with relief that in a few minutes he could start for his train. This gave him courage to face the next thrust.

"What do editors of magazines like *Sweet Stories* think about the trash they print? Of course I know those things appeal to a certain class of people, and I presume there must be money in publishing them, but what I wonder is: Have the editors got the same taste for fiction as the readers, or are they really people of some literary discrimination who have to take those jobs to make a living or to get started in literary work?

"Do they know how bad it is, or do they like it? Do the stories represent their real literary standards?"

Fortunately Buddy was given no opportunity to answer any of these questions; in the grip of his rising temper he would almost certainly have wrought his own confusion; but as Minerva forged ahead she gave him a cue that steadied him.

"I was wondering about that," she continued, "in connection with Selma's story, which you say is a masterpiece. Do you mean, judged by the standards of *Sweet Stories*, or by literary standards that are generally accepted?"

A chance remark of Simpson's was recalled to him: "Fat chance of any masterpieces floating around here." Maybe there was something in this girl's dope. Better not strike back at her too hard.

He knew that the big guns like Shakespeare, say, and Longfellow, were in a class by themselves; but among current writers who got their stuff published he hadn't supposed there were different grades.

He thought the bushers didn't get published at all, and the ones who had something on the ball did; but perhaps he was wrong. There might be a big league and a bush league among the magazines. What was the use of taking any more chances? She hadn't really got the goods on him. He looked at his watch and rose hastily. "Sorry I've got to run."

Dick was on his feet also. Anxious to forestall a similar offer from Selma, he volunteered to drive the guest to the train. But he wanted to hear more; he didn't want Buddy to escape like that, and he paused expectantly.

Selma hardly dared to look up; she was humiliated, and in such a rage with Minerva that she thought she would never

speak to her again. There was no excuse for talking to a guest like that. Would Buddy ever come back after being treated in that fashion?

He didn't look angry as he took her hand and said good-by. He mentioned their next appointment as though he meant to keep it. Then he turned to take leave of Minerva.

"Good-by; too bad we can't go into that further now, but I want you to know that we're judging Mis Gault's story by the highest literary standards there are. And I can assure you, Miss Cline," he added seriously in departing, "that a story has to be a humdinger to get by with us."

When she heard the front door close, Minerva laughed. "Isn't that priceless? A story has to be a humdinger to get by with us—did you ever hear anything so delicious?"

"Minerva Cline, I never heard anything so rude in my life. I can't see what possessed you to come into this house and insult one of my friends. I should think you'd be ashamed of yourself to sit there laughing like that. Haven't you any sense of decent courtesy at all? Honestly, you have shamed me so that I don't feel as if I ever wanted to see you again."

This tirade was so unlike Selma that its effect was pronounced. As it proceeded, Minerva's mirth vanished, and she stared at her friend in consternation; she was as near as possible to being abashed.

"Why, Selma, my dear child, what have I done? You must be overwrought about something. I certainly didn't mean to be insulting. I'm sure Mr. Buddington-Brown took it in the spirit in which it was meant; he didn't seem to be at all offended; you mustn't take things like that so seriously. Of course I apologize if I've hurt your feelings."

"I can't help taking my friends seriously, and I wouldn't mind so much if only my feelings were hurt. But when Mr. Buddington-Brown has been so nice to me, when you know how much it means to me to have his interest and his help—for you to sit there and talk to him the way you did—why, it was the meanest, the most disloyal, thing I ever heard of. You acted as if you were trying to make him hate me."

"Oh, come now, Selma, don't exaggerate. As if I could say anything that would make him lose interest in you! Can't you see that he's crazy about you? If he were going to hate anybody, it would be me, and I could bear up under it; I'm not going to try to sell him any stories."

"What do you mean by that?" Selma asked angrily. "I never knew you were such a cat."

"Please do be reasonable. I can't see why you take this tragic attitude. I did not mean anything; but can it be that you missed the significance of my illuminating discussion with Mr. Buddington-Brown?"

"I certainly did not miss the rudeness of it."

"No, you didn't miss that—you imagined it. I don't doubt that he's an estimable young man in many ways; conceivably he's a good editor for *Sweet Stories*. But couldn't you see that he's positively illiterate? He's just like his readers."

"I couldn't see any such thing. He didn't want to talk about my story, because he knew it embarrassed me. The idea of your pretending to know more than an editor! Just because you lived in Greenwich Village and met some literary people once—"

Selma heard Dick come in, and stopped. She shrank from wounding him by championing Buddy so ardently in his presence.

Minerva was glad of the interruption. "Selma's scolding me, Dick. She thinks I insulted Mr. Buddington-Brown."

Dick grinned appreciatively. "You certainly had him on the run. It was kinda rough the way you burned 'em at him; they were too hot to handle."

"He didn't seem to be offended, did he?" Minerva asked with a touch of complacency in her voice at this tribute.

Dick saw Selma's lip tremble. He felt a sharp stab of jealousy, but he could not bear to see her hurt.

"Sure not," he said reassuringly. "He wasn't a bit sore." And then, with a burst of magnanimity: "He seems to me like a darn good scout."

The look of gratitude he got made him

glad he said it. Minerva was preparing to leave. He wanted to be alone with Selma, and he wasn't sure which of two possible courses was most likely to bring this about. He might let Minerva go alone, which she often did, in which case Selma might go at once to her room. He rather thought she would.

"I didn't put the car up, Minerva; let me run you home." And then, coaxingly: "Come along, Selma—a little air will do you good." But she was in no mood for such a tête-à-tête; had, in fact, been planning to escape as soon as Minerva left.

"You are flattering," Minerva told him, noting his crestfallen expression as he helped her into the car. "You should never let a lady see that any other company would be preferable to hers."

For all her stout denial, Selma's faith in Buddy's infallibility had been shaken by this evening. She would not admit this frankly to herself, and it did not lessen her liking for him—increased it, perhaps—but it made miserable the hours before she went to sleep, hours in which she vacillated between hot indignation toward Minerva, and forebodings that something might intervene to upset the delightful world in which she had lived since learning of her achievement, to mar the bright future which had seemed so enticingly near.

Could there be any mistake about her story? Was it certain that *the* editor would like it as much as Mr. Buddington-Brown did? He was young, and he admitted that he hadn't been an editor very long. Why hadn't she asked him how long? What difference did that make?

If the story were not really as great as he thought, at least it must be good enough for them to take. Surely he couldn't be wrong about that, and that in itself was wonderful. It was more than she had any right to expect; it would give her a start; she ought to be satisfied with that.

But she wasn't. Already her thoughts had fed too much upon ideas of glory; impossible now to be satisfied with more humble fare. How much would they pay her for her story?

She had been too timid to ask Mr. Buddington-Brown. Strange that he had not told her of his own accord. How many would she have to write in order to afford a studio in town, to give up being a governess?

Wouldn't it be terrible if they didn't buy it? If she couldn't do it again? Mr. Buddington-Brown hadn't been much help to-day. Probably he thought it would be better for her to do it by herself, so she could feel that it was all hers.

He was considerate. If she found it impossible, in the end he would help her out. Wasn't Minerva the horridest thing? She didn't care, she'd like him just the same if what Minerva said were true. But that was impossible.

CHAPTER VIII.

JULY TWENTY-SECOND.

UPON Buddy's next visit to Winship, and succeeding ones, he persisted in his refusal to take active part in the rewriting of Selma's story. And try as she would, she could not make the ending satisfactory to herself or to him.

There was one compensation, however; if literature languished, Buddy's popularity with the Russells grew rapidly, and Selma was overjoyed at this. She encouraged him to play golf with Marge, and took it as a personal compliment when his game was referred to with respect.

How glad she was that she had learned to swim! She was grateful to Dick for the painstaking care he had put into those lessons.

It had been very tiresome and uninteresting while the various motions that went into the stroke were taught one at a time. But Dick's methods were handsomely justified in the end.

When at last she was declared ready to coördinate the movements that seemed so awkward when performed separately, her progress was astonishingly rapid. Even her instructor was unprepared for the facility with which she acquired the smooth rhythm of the crawl.

And once she found that she could propel herself through the water easily, she gained confidence rapidly. Her first swim

to the raft was a perilous venture, but after that she undertook it without a qualm. She was learning to dive, and already she could accomplish this with the rudiments of form.

For the first time in her life Selma found herself engaging in an athletic sport without a feeling of hopeless incompetence. She could not swim as well as the others, of course, but she could swim quite respectably, and she felt that she might become expert.

The irony in the situation was that although Dick had actually taught her to swim, Buddy was just as much responsible for the remarkably rapid development of her aquatic skill. She had never admitted it to herself, but after Buddy's first appearance she had gone at her lessons with a new zeal.

Buddy was fond of swimming, and that made it an infinitely more desirable accomplishment. Sometimes he could leave the office early enough to come out in time for a swim before dinner. Once they all went in by moonlight. Selma began to look forward to these parties more eagerly than to the editorial conferences.

Her whole attitude toward her cousin's arduous diversions underwent a gradual change after she found that Buddy not only countenanced, but actually enjoyed them.

Minerva viewed the Russells' activities with superior condescension or frank disdain. Buddy was all interest and admiration. Selma was seeing less of Minerva, and was escaping from her dominance; Buddy's influence was supplanting hers.

It was the fatal Thursday, July 22, but neither Selma nor Buddy recognized anything significant in the date. He had taken the whole afternoon and come out on the one o'clock train.

She was tied to the twins, and although Emma insisted that she might leave them, she conscientiously elected to stick to the job while Buddy and Marge played golf. She would be ready for a swim, she said, at six.

The twins were learning to play tennis. They needed no supervision while on the court, and Selma sat in the shade near by with a pad and pencil, and "All For Love." She had rewritten the ending a dozen times. It had become loathsome to her.

To-day she was assailed by anxious doubts. Was she to be deprived of her freedom by Buddy's carelessness? She had never really blamed him for the accident that befell her story; that is, never after that first few minutes in his office before she knew him, before she saw how sorry he was.

But it would be heart-breaking if this were to cost her her chance to embark on a literary career. The disappointment, after her hopes had run so high, would discourage her from trying to write anything more.

And her head had been so full of new stories after she first learned of her success. She had tried to put these thoughts away; they were disloyal to Buddy. He seemed to be taking it pretty lightly, though. His collaboration wasn't helping very much.

Why, the idea! What possessed her to think such things! He was just as sweet as he could be. He had offered to stay with her that afternoon, to do anything he could except actually write the story. She had made him play with Marge. He couldn't refuse without being rude.

She saw the car turn into the drive. It was half past five already. She called to the twins to come to their supper, and joined the golfers on the porch. The heat was intense, and they looked exhausted.

Marge was all in white. She wore the thinnest of georgette blouses and a crepe de chine skirt, but their freshness was gone. Selma had often wondered why Marge looked so well in a disheveled costume in which she herself would feel like a fright. It almost seemed as though Marge appeared to best advantage in disarray.

And though Selma took great pride in knowing how to dress, and was conscious of her superiority to Marge in this, she envied her cousin's ability to triumph over clothes.

Marge moved with a free and careless swagger. Her poses were unstudied, and most girls could not imitate them without awkwardness. As Selma approached she

threw herself into a chair, with her legs thrust straight out, only her heels touching the floor.

It was a masculine, rather than a feminine attitude, but there was no suggestion of masculinity when Marge assumed it. Her short, blond hair was damp and clinging at the temples, and tiny pearls of perspiration flecked her forehead.

The blue of her eyes and the glistening white of her teeth were heightened by the rich golden tan that overspread her face and neck.

"I want to swim in ice water," she announced. "Selma, you and Buddy can go in the Sound, but I know it will be too hot for me. You ought to see the shots your boy friend got off the tee. What he didn't do to me! He was walloping 'em a mile; he hits a perfect whale of a ball."

"That's all I could do," said Buddy. "My putting and approaching were rotten."

"Listen to the modest violet! Be yourself! He gave me six strokes, and beat me four and three, and crabs about his game. Two over fours for fourteen holes—I'll bet you never shot a better round in your life."

Buddy laughed complacently. "I did have things working pretty well for awhile—if it weren't for those two sixes, and a five on that three hole. Eighty isn't bad, but I should have had a seventy-four."

Selma could at least understand this kind of talk now. "You got an eighty? Why, that's perfectly wonderful! I wish I'd gone over to watch you."

"Good thing you didn't; you'd have melted. How about that swim? I think I'll take a chance on the Sound; it's sure to be colder than I am."

"Father and Dick will be out on the five forty-five," said Marge. "Let's wait for them."

Enoch Russell and Emma had been pretending to each other that it was for Selma's sake that they were especially cordial to Buddy. They had each seen through the other's pretense, and it was time for frankness. Enoch opened the subject while he was changing to his bathing suit. "I see Buddy's here again. He seems to be a nice boy."

"He's not as nice as Selma," Emma answered.

"Selma's a darn fine girl, all right. What do you think, is she going to marry him?"

"I don't know; I wouldn't be surprised though; she seems to prefer him. I kind of hope she will, and it makes me feel like a traitor."

"To Dick, you mean?"

"Of course to Dick; he's perfectly mad about her. You know it just as well as I do, and you're hoping he won't get her—just the same as I am.

"Why is it? Selma's one of the finest girls I ever knew. She's even nicer than Marge. And yet we don't want Dick to marry her. We've got sense enough not to interfere, but when somebody else comes along and cuts him out we're glad. We give aid and comfort to the enemy."

"Oh, come, my dear, it isn't as bad as that. We don't know that she'd have married him anyway. I couldn't see that she gave him any encouragement. He might never be happy without her as long as there was a chance, but he'll get over it when he finds out it's hopeless. We couldn't very well shut the door in Buddy's face. We've got Selma to consider, too, you know."

"Oh, I know it, we couldn't have done anything differently; but I'd like to know why we don't want him to marry Selma. Why is it that we want her for a daughter, and don't want her for a daughter-in-law?"

"Well, I suppose it's because we don't think they're suited to each other. It doesn't seem to me that she's the right girl for him to marry. They're so absolutely different; they don't like the same kind of things; I don't see how they could have any fun together."

"They say that opposites make the best mates."

"I know they do, but I'm not so sure about it. I know we never would have got along so well if one of us was reading a book all the time."

Emma laughed, and Enoch looked sheepish. "Now we're getting down to cases," she said. "I believe we're a couple of old fools. We can't imagine anybody's being happily married unless they're like us. That's what you've had in the back of

your head all the time, and so have I. But really, we can't expect our children to marry people as nice as we are; there aren't enough."

"I guess you're right, and I'm certainly not going to try to do their picking for them. But, just the same, I don't believe Selma's cut out for Dick, and neither do you. If Buddy's going to put him out of his misery so much the better. It'll be a fine thing for Selma too. Come on, we'd better get going. That water will sure feel good." And as they were going down the stairs, Enoch said: "I hear Selma's learned to swim."

"Haven't you seen her? She really has quite a nice stroke. That's one thing she can do that Dick likes."

Dick was preparing a surprise for Enoch. He was as proud of Selma's prowess in the water as a mother showing off her child's first faltering steps. "We're going to have an exhibition by Miss Selma Gault," he announced, when they reached the wharf. "Come on, Selma, you go first, and show 'em your stuff. On your mark—set—go."

Selma made a shallow plunge, and came up swimming easily, heading for the float with a slow and well-timed stroke. Dick looked triumphantly at Enoch, who was watching critically. "By George!" Enoch said. "She's got it. All she needs is power, and that'll come with practice. I'll say you're some instructor."

But Dick didn't wait for the last words. Seeing Buddy start in pursuit, he made a running dive after him, and the two youths raced toward the raft, overtaking Selma, and passing her midway. Dick, being slightly the more powerful swimmer, reduced the advantage Buddy had gained at the start, and their hands flashed out and touched the goal in unison. They hung there panting till Selma and the others arrived.

Life seemed good to Selma. It was as if the bracing salt water had washed away her discontent. She stood upon the raft, arms flung out, leaning toward the stiff, warm breeze.

Her shoulders were thrown back and her chest was raised; she experienced a delightful sense of vigor, an awareness of her body, and of the joy of physical well-being, that she had never felt so keenly before.

It lasted but a moment, this pose assumed unconsciously in response to a new, tingling sensation of vitality, but in that moment something was revealed to Enoch that gave him a clearer comprehension of his son's infatuation, and almost made him sympathize with it.

Buddy, too, received a new impression; it was as if Selma had suddenly stepped out of the rôle of the unhappy governess, and assumed that of the assured and self-reliant beauty, far more difficult to win.

But what Dick felt, as he feasted his eyes during Selma's brief abandonment to a sensuous enjoyment of her growing strength, was nothing new.

Emma and Marge intuitively felt the vibrations that stirred their masculine companions. What a lovely figure Selma had!

They had always known she was pleasingly proportioned, but her shapeliness had been obscured by a retiring hesitancy in her carriage. It seemed to them that the suave lines of her form had gained in definition. They became more conscious of their own lithe and graceful bodies.

Marge advanced upon the springboard, stepping lightly, every movement poised and well controlled; a spring, a little thud as her feet came down together on the end of the board, and then she shot into the air, her body forming a perfect bow, chin in, toes pointed, arms spread out like wings until that last moment, when she seemed to hover above the water, then moving out before her head in an unhurried sweep to cleave the rippling surface—a perfect swan dive.

Emma followed with the same unerring precision. "Next," said Dick, smiling encouragement at Selma.

"I'm ashamed to, after those beauties," she answered; but she started for the board. Marge and Emma were looking up at her, paddling lazily on their backs. Three pairs of sympathetic eyes watched her from the raft.

She was trembling slightly in her eagerness to acquit herself creditably, and her fear that she might fail. Her progress was unsteady.

At first she timidly attempted to imitate the easy, confident stride of Marge and Emma, but the gentle rocking of the raft upon a lazy swell made her steps unsure.

Her hands went out, and her body swayed uncertainly in her efforts to keep her balance. When she reached the end, and drew herself together for the final leap, the water seemed to have receded; it looked so far below. Impossible that it could be little more than three feet beneath her support.

The others followed her breathlessly, growing tense when she leaned perilously to one side, relaxing when she regained her equilibrium. They understood her tremors when she paused on the end of the board. They were as anxious for her success as she. Little Selma was going to dive.

All except Enoch had seen her do it before, but all felt that this dive was important. Even the three that were not blinded by sentimental attachment were deeply solicitous for her, and felt a tender warmth as they watched her awkward grace and understood her timid bravery.

For a second she clung to her tremulous station. She gave Emma and Marge a quick little smile. Then they saw a look of frightened determination come over her face, and she took the plunge. Her arms waved a little wildly before she got them extended, her feet kicked spasmodically as she tried to get them together, and her heels flopped with a little splash as they disappeared; but she took the water cleanly, at a proper angle, and with her body nearly straight.

It was not a dive for a beginner to be ashamed of. Many persons dive for years without improving on it. When she came up and shook the water from her eyes she was greeted by a burst of cheers and congratulations. Her appearance was also the signal for a display of masculine skill. Even Enoch put a little extra strut into his approach.

"What's come over Selma?" Emma asked. She and Marge were sitting on the raft alone, watching four heads bobbing on the water a hundred yards away.

"I can't imagine. Isn't she splendid? I believe we'll make a man of her yet. Maybe the boy friends buck her up."

"You mean Dick?"

"Dick and Buddy; she's getting to be a regular vamp. I'll be afraid to bring my suitors to the house any more if she keeps it up."

Emma considered this seriously for a minute, and then she asked: "Which one is she going to take?"

"You can search me; that's the funny part of it. At first I thought she was crazy about Buddy; but now I think it may be only a literary attachment after all. Of course she says it is, but then she never would tell. She doesn't like to talk about such things; she never brags about conquests."

"Dick seems to be hit pretty hard," Emma suggested.

"Hit hard is right; but Buddy's got it just as bad—no, not quite as bad—he will play golf with me—but bad enough. I never saw Dick so hipped on any one; it'll be a dirty shame if Buddy beats him out."

"Do you think Dick would be happy with Selma?"

"Sure she would, if he's in love with her—and he is. At first I didn't think she could be happy with him, but now I'm not so sure; she's changed. Still, I don't believe he'll get her."

"Why, I thought you said you couldn't tell. I thought you thought it was pretty even."

"I did say that, but—"

Marge hesitated, and Emma looked at her sharply. "But what?"

"Well, Dick's a peach and all that. He's my brother, and of course I like him, but I don't think he's quite—it just seems to me that if a girl had her choice she'd be more likely to choose Buddy."

"So that's the way it is," thought Emma. What she said was: "They're going in; I'll race you to the dock."

She took her defeat philosophically, and allowed herself to be assisted up the ladder by her daughter, with concealed amusement. She had no resentment when her children assumed a protective attitude; she was untroubled by her years, and saw no reason for being sensitive about them.

Buddy missed his train, and accepted an

invitation to spend the night. It was nearly twelve o'clock when the party broke up, and Selma went to her room. She picked up Keeler's " Writing for a Living," and read:

> The market for fiction is constantly growing. At no time in the world's history has authorship presented such opportunities.
>
> But the writer of to-day, if he would be successful, must be a business man. He must study his markets as the manufacturer does, must keep his finger upon the pulse of popular taste, and give the public what it wants.
>
> The writer who will do that, and who will master the rules of his craft, may be assured of a comfortable living. If he has special ability besides, he may make a fortune.

Selma put down the book and picked up her story. She thought she knew what was the matter with the ending. Perhaps she could get it right to-morrow. She was too tired to work on it now.

When she got her studio in New York she'd join a gymnasium with a swimming pool.

She'd exercise regularly. It wouldn't do to get soft again when she moved to the city. She stretched luxuriously so that she could feel some nascent muscles. Perhaps she might go to a golf school; she could take riding lessons, too. Funny she'd never cared for those things.

She looked at her watch. Half past twelve; the house was very quiet. The others must have gone to bed in a hurry. She slipped into her nightgown and switched off the light.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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RESIGNATION

FOR days and nights on end we dreamed
Of winter in the South,
Where Nature always wears a smile
Upon her lovely mouth.
In fond anticipation we
To singing beaches came
And watched the sun set on the Gulf
In bars of matchless flame.

No sooner were the trunks unpacked
Than letters came from home
Filled to the brim with weather news,
Each one a monochrome.
The snow, they said, had dressed the hills
In robes of vestal white,
And made the leafless countryside
A vision of delight.

How this affected us you can
Imagine, possibly;
And how we longed for home—the joys
Of stark frigidity.
Lest it should break our hearts to think
Of snow in soaring banks,
We'll pack our trunks; but not to-day:
We're sitting pretty, thanks!

Edward W. Barnard.

Winner Take All

By JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

A BUNCHED field thundered down the stretch. It was a stirring nose to nose finish. Then they flashed on.

An interval and then a new clatter of hoofs. A single horse galloped by.

"Old Alcibiades is running true to form," remarked a man in the stands. "That skate ought to be entered in the ice-wagon sweepstakes. Then he might have a chance."

The contest over, Alcibiades, the world's leading loser for all time and all tracks, resumed his consumption of oats and hay well down on Poverty Row. And as he munched these viands so dear to the equine heart, argument waxed warm outside his stable door.

"You'll have to do something about that bill—right now." Sam Green of the Mammoth Hay & Feed Stores cast aside all diplomacy.

"How much does it amount to—now?"

The question was voiced by a white haired man with flowing beard—more a miner of the desert country he looked than the owner of race horses. In his clear blue eyes sparkled optimism's light. The weight of three score and added years was a trifling burden to Grandpop Hawkins.

"Two hundred and seventy-five dollars and thirty-six cents," was Sam Green's uncompromising reply, "and I've got to have it right away."

"I've entered Alcibiades in the third race to-morrow," Grandpop Hawkins announced with cheery buoyancy, "and perhaps—"

"You've had that brute entered in half the races this season," Green had no words that could fully express his appreciation of Alcibiades, "and the chicken-hearted beagle hasn't even shown."

"But I have him on edge for that special race," the old man temporized. "With a purse of—"

"Say, listen, Grandpop," the feed man's patience was a frayed and ragged thing. "If the bookies give old Alcy the proper odds on past performances, he'll be the first one thousand to one shot on any track. His only chance is for the field to drop dead in front of him. Even then I'd lay seven to five that he would stop and cry his eyes out because his playmates had been

called to another world, and forget all about finishing."

"You don't know Alcibiades."

"I do—that's why I'm not interested in his entry in any race. He's nothing but a hay and oats burner, the worst around here. If you keep on trying to win with that goat—"

"That's my motto," Grandpop Hawkins broke in, a sanguine light again appearing in his twinkling blue eyes. "That's my motto—keep on trying—try and try again."

"That's my motto, too," retorted Sam Green with just a touch of bitterness, "and I'm going to try and try again to collect this feed bill. If I don't get it from you, I'll attach that Alcy nag, and the laundry wagon or the soap factory will be his finish."

With this threat, he continued his journey along Poverty Row, visiting districts more fruitful than the barren soil where Grandpop Hawkins and the gentle Alcibiades had their being.

In spite of deprecatory remarks, Sam Green was at the track the next day and when Alcibiades finished eighth by three lengths in a field composed of seven other horses, he tore up a two-dollar pari-mutuel ticket and grinned at himself.

"He'll win—sometime," Grandpop said cheerfully, when a profane jockey turned the horse back to its owner. "Don't you worry about that, son. He'll win and when he does—"

"We'll all be dead and buried. Why, that old dog couldn't beat a steam-roller with a five furlong handicap over the Derby distance. He's so used to seeing other horses' tails out there on the track that I don't believe he'd recognize one of his own kind if he met him, face to face."

Still Grandpop Hawkins's faith remained unshaken and Alcibiades was rubbed and blanketed with a care seldom given to any but the kings and queens of the equine world. He formally entered him in other races scheduled for the swiftly closing days of the Green Oaks season, drawing on his last reserves to meet the attending costs.

"We'll just keep on trying, Alcibiades, my boy," the old man whispered as he measured out a generous helping of high grade oats and tender alfalfa. "Some day, we'll win."

But at a meeting of the stewards of the racing association that night quite a different note was sounded. The fate that hovered over the optimistic Grandpop Hawkins and the craven Alcibiades was a subject of solemn conference.

"We can't let that old coot go to the poor farm and his horse to the soap factory," said Big Jim Carlton, the head of the association. "It would be a shame that we couldn't live down in a couple of lifetimes."

"Let's make up a purse—say a couple of thousand—five would be better—and give it to the old man," suggested George Warren, secretary of the organization.

"You can't do that," Carlton responded soberly. "Grandpop is as proud as any F. F. V. who ever starved to death rather than take charity. He would curse us mightily if we offered money."

"Yes—the average Spanish grandee is a humble lackey compared to the old man on that score," declared Carl Meredith, a member of the board. "He's a wise old owl, too, except on racing. He's a bit cracked on that."

"That's why we've got to do something," Carlton explained. "It's up to us."

A silent moment in which the collective brains of the Green Oaks racing association focused upon the situation.

"I'll tell you what we will do." It was Warren who offered the solution. "We'll have up a purse of five thousand and see that this Alcibiades nag wins it. That's the only way we could get Grandpop to take the money."

Big Jim Carlton's usually placid brow was corrugated with a grave frown. A smile chased it away, as he pictured the joy of the old man leading a winner stableward.

"The trouble," he said, "is finding entries this Alcy horse is sure to beat. I don't think there are enough confirmed losers on this track to make up a field to follow him in. We might get some outside talent with confirmed cases of string-halt and spavin. Then Alcy would gallop home like a stake horse."

"Too raw," Meredith objected. "Even Grandpop Hawkins wouldn't stand for that. And what would the customers say?"

"Just leave it to me," George Warren was possessed of a bright idea. "Just leave it to me. I think I've got a plan that will send Alcy breezing under the wire with lots of daylight shining between him and the place horse."

"No dope," warned Big Jim Carlton.

"Never doped a horse in all my life."

"No crooked work," Meredith interposed.

"Never fear."

"Wonder if the handicapper can do something—legitimately," mused Carlton.

"Handicapper!" laughed Warren. "Why, boss, if the handicapper did any more for him than he has already, Alcy could race with a two pound monkey up and then be three stone overweight. You look at the form chart if you want to see a record. More than a hundred starts and yet to show."

"How will we split the money?" Meredith turned his attention to the financial end of the plot.

"Split nothing." This from Big Jim. "This is going to be a winner take all race with Alcibiades the winner and Grandpop Hawkins, the owner, trainer, and chief stable boy."

Thus instructed, George Warren went from owner to owner, arranging details of a race destined to be remembered until the last barrier is raised, the last finish line crossed. Turfmen still talk about it in their clubs, while stable boys in the harness rooms retell the tale with more skillfully embroidered detail at every telling.

"I'll enter old Battle Ax," Cliff Harrison of the Blue Grass stables announced, after George Warren had whispered the details of the plot. "Battle Ax hasn't started this season and I just carry him around for company, but he'll add class to the field on account of past performances. He's getting a little old, I know, but—"

"He voted at the last election, didn't he?" Warren asked soberly.

"Now, don't you get to running down old Battle Ax," Harrison countered, "or he's liable to go out and win this race. There are plenty of slower horses on this track and that Alcibiades goat trails the world."

"If you dare let that dotard of yours win—"

"Oh—don't worry. I don't want to see Grandpop starve to death. I'll have Willie Sessions ride. He'll follow instructions, if he has to make Battle Ax climb a tree before he finishes."

From the Blue Grass stables, George Warren went to Richard Hale, millionaire owner of Cassandra, twice winner of the Derby. The Hale stables were large, their stalls many, and their owner a man who kept an open purse.

"You can put me down for five thousand added money," were his first words, following Warren's explanation.

"We don't want your money," the association secretary responded. "We've had a good season and we'll take care of that. What we want is an entry, guaranteed not to win."

"You'll have both," was Hale's declaration. "The five thousand is added money and my entry is—"

He stopped to scratch a well thatched head. Then with a burst of trumpeting laughter:

"I'll send up to my farm for Nancy Belle—Nancy will carry my colors against the great Alcibiades."

"Nancy Belle?" George Warren's wrinkled brow told of puzzlement and then as the light of memory dawned: "Good Lord! Is she still living?"

"Hale as my name and twice as hearty," responded the owner. "A great, great grandmother and just now dam to her twenty-fourth foal."

"For the love of Mike, how old is she?"

"Well, the stud book says twenty-eight, but I think that Nancy, like many of her sex, has fudged a little—maybe only a year or two."

Next Warren interviewed Pat Milligan, a veteran of the track and breeding farm to whom racing was a business and not a sport. Here more added money was pressed upon the secretary, but the question of an entry proved baffling.

"I haven't a horse over fifteen in my

stables," Milligan said, a note of regret tincturing his warm brogue, "but—"

Like Hale, he stopped to consider a possibility that had just appeared before his mind's eye.

"My veterinary says that Kingstone ought to have a little exercise," he added with a grin. "I might let him walk a couple of furlongs with Alcibiades. I'd want a good strong boy up, for Kingstone has the Milligan spirit and is always out to win. He might think that something was expected of him and start to do his stuff."

"Yes—you want to look out for that."

"I will."

Two more entries were obtained before George Warren completed his task. He had chosen a race in which Alcibiades had already been entered and a visit to owners of horses whose names appeared in the contest easily convinced them that they should scratch and leave the field clear.

Somehow, the word was whispered around so that the betting fraternity gave the race wide berth, but not a sound reached the withered ear of Grandpop Hawkins.

Carefully, the old man fed and groomed the sleek Alcibiades as though he were an entry in the classic Derby. The news of the added money, making a purse of fifteen thousand dollars as the stake, filled his heart with greater zeal.

"You've got to win this race, Alcy, my boy," he told the docile beast the evening before the contest. "If you don't—well, I just don't know what is going to become of us. I'm getting a little old to rustle for you, and I think it is sort of up to you to help the partnership along. You're bound to win some time. Why not make it now?"

As he came from the stable, he encountered Sam Green of the Mammoth Hay & Feed Stores. Sam was making his final efforts along Poverty Row, threatening, cajoling or imploring as the case demanded.

"Well—how about it, Grandpop?" He turned his attention to the venerable owner of Alcibiades.

"I'll take care of that to-morrow, Mr. Green," the old man responded. "You see, I've entered Alcibiades in the fifth race—fifteen thousand dollars and winner take all. That 'll be enough to square up all those bills and leave us quite a little nest egg to retire on."

"Say, listen, Grandpop," Sam Green's voice lost some of its brusqueness. A note of almost kindly sympathy stole into it—a note new to the man whose occupation was to dun the harried inhabitants of Poverty Row. "If that horse of yours wins the fifth race to-morrow—I'll write 'Paid' across that little bill of ours. Is that a bet?"

"No—you can't do that, Mr. Green," Grandpop Hawkins spoke soberly. "Alcy and I don't bet. We race for purses. We're turfmen, not gamblers. If we win to-morrow, you will get your bill paid in full."

"And if you don't?" Sam Green was his brusque self again.

A shadow stole across the bright optimism that habitually shone in the old man's eyes, a shadow that seemed to come with the final rays of the sun now disappearing upon the eve of the race upon which Grandpop Hawkins counted so much. But it only held there for a moment, cheer returning in its wake.

"But we're going to win," he countered. "I've trained him especially for this race and besides—"

"Besides what?" This almost impatiently.

"Besides, he's bound to win sometime. If at first you don't succeed, you know, and I think that Alcy is about due."

"Due!" snorted Sam Green, as he turned up Poverty Row to harry other tardy owners. "Due! He's so far past due that he ought to meet himself coming down the stretch when he faces the barrier to-morrow."

Then dawned the day of the race, a race that attracted attention among owners and attachés of the track as none had done since the running of the great handicap.

As the hour of the contest drew nearer, George Warren was visited with an attack of the fidgets in the most aggravated form. His plans had been well laid and were guaranteed to go through according to program. Everything and everybody concerned, had been fixed—all but Alcibiades and Grandpop Hawkins.

"You can't tell what will happen," he told Big Jim Carlton, "and if it turns out too raw, Grandpop won't stand for it. He's so dodgasted honest."

"The best thing to do is to kidnap him. Get him away from the track until the race is over."

"I'll have a worse time than Dick Hale's crew is having separating old Nancy Belle from her latest foal." Warren responded. "The old girl has forgotten all about her racing days and sort of reckons that this is about her last turn at motherhood, so she's making the most of it. They got her out on the track for a breezer this morning and when they passed the stables, her colt nickered and old Nancy went over the fence in spite of all the exercise boy could do. Breakfast was served right then and there and the track could go hang for all of Nancy."

"Well, you've got to do something to get Grandpop out of the way. That's a cinch," was Big Jim's decision. "I'll leave it up to you, George. You've handled the affair right pretty thus far—so hop to it."

And George Warren stewed his brains, seeking a plausible excuse to get Grandpop Hawkins away from Alcibiades before the horses were called to the post for the fifth race. It was Sam Green who furnished the happy thought, although Sam was bent on anything but bringing joy to the small quarters inhabited by Grandpop Hawkins amid the genteel wretchedness of Poverty Row.

Sam was grim and determined and word from headquarters had forced him to stoop to the last resort to extract payment of Hawkins's long overdue feed bill.

"Where away, Sam?" Warren inquired as he met the collector.

Two things told George that Sam was intent upon attachment, the legal attachment by a creditor upon property, animate or inanimate. First was the determined set of Sam Green's jaw. It told that he had reached the ultimate Thule in regard to collections. Second was the presence of a seedy man who wore a bright tin star ostentatiously upon his vest, a star that defied ignorance of its presence and branded the man behind it as the law's minion.

"I'm going down and slap a plaster on that Alcy horse of Grandpop Hawkins," Green replied dourly. "I've waited patiently—too darned patiently—my boss gave him an awful hiding on that account this morning."

"But Alcy's entered in the fifth race this afternoon," Warren protested.

"Yes—and how many other races has he been entered in?" the feed man countered in argument. "That's all he is—entered in them—although the rest of the field don't know it after they've started. Sometimes the judges wait for him to finish before they announce the winners, but not always."

"He might win this time," the secretary hinted darkly. "There's a lot of talk, you know."

"I've heard too much talk already," Green was adamant. "That's all I get from Grandpop Hawkins. That Alcibiades nag of his would be outclassed by a field of heavy duty tractors and I'm going to—"

"Wait a minute!"

The big idea had burst in the darkened precincts of George Warren's mind like a skyrocket in a moonless sky. Here was Opportunity thundering at his door and he had nearly been deaf to the summons.

"How much is that bill?" he asked.

"Two hundred and seventy-five dollars and thirty-six cents."

"And costs," added the constable.

"I'll pay it," George Warren peeled bills from an adipose roll—then hesitated and replaced them in his pocket. "I'll pay it—if you will go through with my little program."

"I'll go through with anything short of placing a bet on Alcibiades to collect that bill," Sam Green retorted.

Then Warren unfolded his new strategy. Green and the constable duly served the attachment, libeling the body of one horse, to wit: Alcibiades, in attachment for the sum of two hundred and seventy-five dollars and thirty-six cents with costs added.

"But he's entered in the fifth race this afternoon," Grandpop Hawkins protested, almost tearfully. It was a moment of high tragedy in the old man's life and the op-

timistic sparkle had fled from the bright blue of his eyes.

Had this attachment been reality instead of part of George Warren's tactics, Sam Green would have weakened, so deeply did the old man's sorrow touch him. Instead, however, he played the part of the relentless creditor.

"He's always entered in something," he said. "This time Alcy is odds-on favorite in the soap plant handicap. He'll be selling six bars for a quarter when he goes under the wire in this race."

"But, listen, Mr. Green," Grandpop pleaded.

At this juncture, George Warren appeared. Quickly the situation was explained to him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. Hawkins," he turned to the old man. "I'll advance you the money and you can pay me after the race this afternoon or some other time. Just jump into my car and we'll run down town and get this attachment dismissed."

"But it's nearly post time," Grandpop pointed out. "We can't get back—"

"I'll fix that up," Warren replied hurriedly. "I'll have the clerk of the court telephone the track and tell the constable to release this attachment. You have your jockey, haven't you?"

"Charlie Barnes—I've paid him already."

"All right—hop in and we'll step on the gas."

George Warren fixed up the attachment in rather less than no time, but it was on the return trip that his car developed motor trouble. Somehow or other, the engine would not respond to his profanest ministrations.

"They're going to the paddock now." Grandpop Hawkins consulted his heavy nickel-plated watch.

The last car scurrying trackward had whizzed by and they were alone upon the deserted highway.

More tinkering with the engine and again the old man looked at his watch.

"They're at the post now," he murmured. "It 'll soon be over."

A roar announced the starting of the engine and the car was on its way.

"We'll be there in half an hour," Warren said cheerfully.

II.

THUNDEROUS applause greeted the field in the fifth race as the entries paraded before the stands. They were cheers that would have made the heart of Grandpop Hawkins beat with pride as Alcibiades appeared, leading. Behind him stalked the venerable Battle Ax, Cliff Harrison's entry for the Blue Grass stables. Veterans of the track pointed him out and recalled his past glories.

Then came Nancy Belle, torn from her sucking colt after a battle and marring the impressiveness of the parade by her constant efforts to get back to her young. Few there were who could remember when Nancy Belle was the toast of the clubhouse and the repeated favorite in the betting ring.

Next walked Kingstone with stiffened stride, fresh from the care of a veterinary. In turn came Peach Bloom, her freshness long faded, and His Eminence, the archaic entry of the Griffen string of thoroughbreds.

"Did you ever see such a collection of antiques?" Big Jim Carlton turned to Carl Meredith after surveying the field.

"George Warren certainly did a noble job of it," the other replied. "It's a good thing he got grandpop away from here. Even the program boys can smell the rat."

And now the horses were lining up before the barrier. A hush stole over the stands, a hush that would have done honor to the get-away of the Derby.

"They're off!"

The words boomed from the stands, a thunderous roar.

Big Jim Carlton glued his glasses to his eyes, training them upon the loosely bunched field after the first furlong. An oath escaped him.

"What's the matter?" Meredith had not brought his binoculars with him.

"His Eminence is only going on three legs, yet Alcibiades is trailing—as usual. That skate don't think it's polite to have another horse behind him."

"What are the others doing?"

"Every jock is pulling his arms out of their sockets so that Alcy will catch up. Charlie Barnes is using his bat on him, trying to wake him up. I can almost hear him snore, can't you?"

Once more the stands were roaring, but this time with laughter. The nature of this much heralded race had dawned upon them and they were hailing it with howls of undiluted delight.

"Well—Kinsey has at last got His Eminence stopped," Big Jim sighed with relief.

The antiquated entry of the Griffen stables had been drawn up to the outside rail while his jockey examined his feet.

"And Peach Bloom?" Carl Meredith inquired solicitously.

"She'll fade before long if that jock's arms hold out. Alcibiades is crawling up on her—crawling is right! He'd make better time on his wishbone and at the same time save his feet."

The field had now reached the half, while the stands rocked with laughter. Never in all the history of the turf had there been such a contest. The jockeys upon the leaders were straining to check the eager veterans, while Alcibiades, despite Charlie Barnes's cudgeling, remained in his favorite position—the rear.

"Who was that?"

From his place in the box Carl Meredith saw one of the horses leap the fence and start across the infield.

"I bet Hightower gets an awful lacing from Pat Milligan for letting Kingstone do that," Big Jim frowned as he held his glasses closer. "It 'll lay him up for a couple of weeks more. I didn't think he had it in him."

Another shriek from the stands, a shriek of joy, unrestrained, as Peach Bloom surrendered to the frantic tugging of her jockey and turned around in the back stretch to head for the stables. Alcibiades was outwitted by this maneuver for the tails of Battle Ax and Nancy Belle still remained ahead of him and his rules for racing made no mention of the conduct to be followed with a horse going in the opposite direction.

He hesitated, as though considering which course to take—which tail to follow—but as those going the contra-clockwise route of the track were numerically superior, the frenzied efforts of Charlie Barnes prevailed and Alcy rounded the three-quarters turn conscientiously believing that he was in his proper position, trailing a field that had been cut down to three.

"We've got to do something with that Alcibiades," Big Jim Carlton growled, his glasses still held to his eyes. "They'll be coming down the stretch in a minute, and old Alcy will absolutely refuse to be so impolite as to pass either Battle Ax or Nancy."

"Barnes has done everything but shoot off a charge of dynamite," said Meredith. "We might flag them and send down the starter's flivver with enough nitro for a blast. I think the only way you're going to get that Alcibiades under the wire a winner is to shoot him across."

"Those jocks are doing everything they can to lose," Carlton rejoined, "but—"

He stopped. A new roar fairly lifted the roofs from the grand stands. As the horses neared the stables that spread out along the home stretch, Nancy Belle, mother of twenty-four, heard the falsetto neigh of her new born. She stopped, all four feet braced, her jockey continuing on toward the judge's stand with no horse beneath him.

Then the faithful mother trotted over to the outside rail, nuzzled her young and then duplicated her feat of the morning by gracefully leaping the fence.

Only Battle Ax and the gentle Alcibiades remained.

And now they entered the stretch, as the roar of the stands crescendoed. It was not the dull roar of thousands urging their favorites to greater endeavor. It was laughter, gargantuan laughter, laughter such as rent Brobdingnag at the sight of puny Gulliver.

"Nature seems to have lent a hand," Carl Meredith watched the elimination of Nancy Belle with equanimity. "Perhaps something will happen to Battle Ax before they cross the wire."

"Everything that can happen has happened and a whole lot more." Big Jim Carlton was nearing the point of despera-

tion. "That's just like George Warren to sneak off with Grandpop Hawkins and leave me with this on my hands. He might have known that Alcibiades would pull something like this."

"Come on, you, Alcibiades," roared the stands between paroxysms. "Come on, you, Alcy!"

Willie Sessions on Battle Ax, by the use of almost superhuman effort, had choked the old warrior of the track down to a gait that was hardly more than an amble. Barnes, astride old grandpop's entry, applied both whip and spur to force his craven mount to lumber into the lead, but Alcibiades was far too much a creature of habit to do such an unprecedented thing.

If there were but two horses in the race, he knew his place—second with plenty of daylight between him and the winner.

He stopped to look around at the frantic Barnes, reproach written in his placid brown eyes.

"What have I done to be so scourged?" the brown eyes seemed to say, and then he continued in the wake of the thoroughly subjugated Battle Ax.

And now the stands were in even greater turmoil. They fairly rocked with the outburst of many voices. Hands were held to aching sides, as laughter, convulsive laughter, made strong men weak, the tears streaming down their cheeks in the high pathos of that moment.

"I wish I had George Warren here—I'd ring his neck!" Big Jim Carlton laid down his glasses. "We've got to do something and do it quick."

He laid down his glasses and leaped over the low railing of his box. In another moment an assistant starter was charging down the stretch, waving frantically at Willie Sessions.

Battle Ax was brought to a full stop, and Alcibiades halted in his tracks as Charlie Barnes threw away a futile whip.

"Turn around and go the other way," the assistant starter shouted to Sessions.

Meantime, Carlton had dashed into the judges' stand.

"Can't we give a special ruling that this race shall be run clock-wise instead of the usual way?" he asked breathlessly.

"You can, but what about Peach Bloom?" the presiding official inquired. "She's already finished traveling in that direction. Finished and under blanket, eating her second bucket of oats."

"You're right." Big Jim lunged out to dispatch another assistant starter flivving down the track to head off the contestants, now nearing the back stretch.

Once more they started for the finish wire, Carlton's messenger speeding back with the gas wide open.

"Willie Sessions says that he'll fix it," the man spoke excitedly in Carlton's ear. "He says not to worry."

"What's he going to do?"

Breathlessly, he whispered the message as the two racers lumbered into the head of the stretch.

"They're going so fast that you have to take a sight on a furlong pole to see if they're moving," Carl Meredith remarked, as Carlton rejoined him in the box. "In spite of everything, I think that Alcibiades is going to run true to form. If Battle Ax don't die of senile decay between now and the wire, poor old Grandpop will never be able to pay that feed bill."

"You just wait and see," Carlton answered.

And now they were nearing the finish at a dignified trot, the jockeys, unused to that gait from a racing horse, bouncing merrily in their saddles.

Slower, still slower, became the pace of the venerable Battle Ax, but the faithful Alcibiades regulated his steps and kept a respectful distance from the leader.

A dozen strides remained to the wire as the horses slowed down to a walk. Alcy was now ambling in that weary, disgusted fashion that indicated clearly his entire disapproval of the contest and his fervent hope that it would soon be over.

Nearer—still nearer.

"What's the use! What's the use!" Carl Meredith apostrophized the heavens. "That miserable nag would stop and lie down beside Battle Ax if the old gaffer dropped dead. It's simply a game you can't beat, Jim."

"Just wait!" Carlton held up a staying hand. "Watch!"

With the finish line a foot or two away, Willie Sessions arose in his stirrups and dived over the inside rail to land in a bed of geraniums.

Battle Ax continued, crossing under the wire, while Alcibiades gratefully followed, sighing audibly.

A roar from the stands. The cognoscenti of the racing world were quick to pass the word and then another roar, louder, longer, more hearty than before.

Then came the winner's number. Time: 36 minutes, 3 3-5 seconds. A record for the ages considering the distance.

Through the outside paddock gate dashed an automobile to come to an abrupt stop as two men leaped out.

"How did the fifth race come out?" George Warren was breathless.

"Mr. Harrison's Battle Ax came in first," a stable boy wiped away the tears that were flooding his cheeks, "but the judges disqualified him. Willie Sessions, his jockey, fell off just before the wire."

"But the winner?" Grandpop Hawkins gasped.

"The winner?" the stable boy was again seized with a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter. "There's your winner!"

He gestured to a flower-wreathed horse that was being led into the paddock, his gentle confusion proclaiming him as a victor for the first time.

"Alcibiades!"

"I knew you'd win." Tears came into Grandpop Hawkins's sparkling blue eyes, tears of joy, not laughter. "Now we can buy that little farm and retire."

Then to George Warren, who held forth a congratulatory hand:

"I told you, Mr. Warren, that we'd keep on trying. If at first you don't succeed, you know, why try—try—"

The old man's voice broke as emotion surged over him.

And George Warren turned quickly away, whether to hide a smile or a tear—only George Warren knew.

THE END

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ON, ON, FOREVER!

BENEATH this starry arch
Naught resteth or is still;
But all things hold their march,
As if by one great will:
Moves one, move all; hark to the footfall!
On, on, forever!

Yon sheaves were once but seed;
Will ripens into deed;
As cave-drops swell the streams,
Day-thoughts feed nightly dreams;
And sorrow tracketh wrong,
As echo follows song:
On, on, forever!

By night, like stars on high,
The hours reveal their train;
They whisper and go by:
I never watch in vain.
Moves one, move all; hark to the footfall!
On, on, forever!

Harriet Martineau.

Alkali

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "Moonglow," "The Rider o' Spook Hollow," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

WHEN the immense tracts of mountain and prairie of the American West were unsettled and unknown, marked only by the trails of intrepid pioneers and the bleached bones of those who had failed, and the vast forests were desolate and wild, inhabited by savages and animals. James Mason pushed his way into the interior, where white man had never lived. His wife, Jennie, and nine-year-old son, Jimmie, constituted his family, and his friend, Tom Miles, with a little daughter, Betty, composed the entire party. Miles's older daughter had been killed in an Indian attack on the hazardous trip out, and Mrs. Miles had committed suicide. As the first snow of winter makes work impossible, Mason, by tremendous energy, has completed a crude but substantial house, plowed the soil, made friends with the Cheyenne Indians, and established relations at the nearest outpost, Fort Laramie. But his achievements were at the cost of his wife's happiness, who, hungry for attention and companionship, cries herself to sleep. Mason is unaware of her discontent, so absorbed is he in the new land.

CHAPTER XIII.

DISASTER.

THE next morning the snow had ceased to fall, but the valley was covered to a depth of three inches. The weather was cold. The snow crunched under foot as Mason walked toward the corral to look over the horses. They stood in dejected discomfort, huddled together in a corner. There was something frightfully desolate in the scene, and the man shook his head defiantly.

"It would 'a' been nice if we could 'a' got here for a crop this year," he muttered.

They had erected a lean-to that offered shelter for four horses. The four Mason wanted to keep he now drove into that shelter. Then he opened the corral bars and drove the others out into the valley. He saw that they joined the cattle at the frozen river. Habit had taken the animals there to drink. Finding the water frozen, they stood in docile fashion munching snow.

After breakfast Mason and Miles saddled their horses and drove the herd down

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toward the plains they planned to use as a winter grazing ground. The cold air brought tears to their eyes, and soon their beards were flecked with ice, their cheeks red and raw from the bite of the wind.

Shortly before noon they drove the cattle into a coulee that was sheltered.

"Might as well let 'em wander from here, Tom," Mason said through lips that were blue with cold. They dismounted and built a fire which they started with buffalo chips gathered from a sheltered spot. There was a great deal of snow about, but it was unlike that in the valley. There were many bare spots which were compensated for in drifts where the wind had swept.

The men warmed themselves and ate hungrily of dry food. Presently they mounted again for the return ride. Mason cast a wondering eye over the herd. The animals seemed disconsolate; lost for a place to find food and warmth. But they left them and rode back toward the valley.

"This here is a man's country, Tom," Mason said after the manner of a man who seeks consolation from his own efforts to inspire it in others. "We'll have to be ridin' out here every day or so an' keep the cattle bunched."

Far in the distance they saw a mighty herd of buffalo and the great creatures were lumbering across the plains in a southerly direction.

Off to the east lay the Bad Lands. How different was the torture they offered now! Bleak, raw, cold, swept ever by a biting wind.

"You bet it's a man's country," Miles said a little complainingly. "It's rip-roarin' hell when it starts kickin' up!" He shook his arms about his body to start circulation, then spoke again:

"Jim, how would it seem to you if you could walk into some place where they was a few men an' women to talk to? What would you give to see a new face an' hear a new voice, an' talk with folks general an' free like?"

"I dunno," Mason said, turning his face away from the wind as much as possible, "I dunno, Tom. Derned if I've thought about it, we been so busy gittin' things set fer spring!"

"It ud seem damn good to me," Miles said frankly. Mason made no answer.

When they reached the shelter of the hills the weather was less torturous. By slapping their hands against their thighs they managed to keep their fingers from freezing, but Mason felt that his left foot was frostbitten because it had ceased to hurt him with the cold and was numb and heavy.

Days lengthened into weeks, weeks into months. About the valley the snow swirled and banked, the winds beat an incessant tattoo upon the house, the utter loneliness and desolation gripped the pioneers in its clutches and twisted their thoughts. Miles suddenly resented Mason's authority. On one occasion he refused point-blank to take the hard journey to the herd.

Mason snapped his teeth shut, fighting back the hot words that rose to his lips. His hands clenched into fists as he looked at his friend, but he controlled himself.

"I reckon you ain't yourself, Tom," he said slowly. "Stay back this time an' rest up. I'll be goin' it alone."

He set about dressing for the long, cold trip. Miles sat in sullen silence before the fire. Finally, when Mason was half ready, he rose and began dressing himself. Mason made no comment.

Mrs. Mason watched the two silently, appraisingly. Little Jimmie had his eyes wide again, he was learning another thing, learning that his father and Miles were human and that human flesh was balking under the ravages of toil and the lash of loneliness.

"I'm plumb sorry I said that, Jim," Miles muttered as he wrapped himself for the ride.

"It ain't worth talkin' of, Tom," Mason said, "I'd be stayin' here if I was you. I guess you earned a rest!"

"Stay here an' let me go with pa, please," Jimmie suddenly called out. "I never been to the herd. I gotta learn all these things some time!"

There was considerable objection both from the father of the lad and from Miles. In the end, however, Mason agreed that Jimmie might go. As he did so the mother came to him, laying her toil-worn hands on his heavy muffler.

"You're goin' to take him along, Jim?" she asked, her voice queerly strained. "Little Jimmie goin' on a trip like that?"

He mistook her meaning somewhat and laughed uproariously, at the same time patting her shoulder.

"Little Jimmie? He ain't so little! 'Member that, ma! Jimmie's growin' up right fast! Why, he's—Heavens above—he's killed an Indian! He rides an' ropes an' shoots—derned if he can always be your baby! He's gotta play his part, ma!"

For several moments she was silent, then she said:

"Sometimes I wonder about you, Jim—wonder what's changed you so. I guess it's fallin' in love with the valley ahead o' Jimmie an' me!"

He blinded himself to the tone she used, made himself a little ridiculous by the ostentatious manner in which he laughed aside her remark. Seeing that, the woman went to the fireplace and poked inconsequently at the burning logs. Then she said:

"Wrap up good, Jimmie, I guess we won't never do anythin' to interfere in pa's valley!"

Jimmie went. He rode between the two men, for Miles insisted upon making the trip, and Jennie Mason was certain to be undisturbed in the few daylight hours they would be away. Soon after they left the pale sun rose and shone above the mountains. The clear, cold air took on a new taint, a dampness that, though it penetrated to the very marrow of the bone was, nevertheless, a sign of warmer weather.

By noon the temperature had risen considerably. So much so that the snow under hoof had ceased to crunch and now clung in sticky masses to the hoofs.

"It's goin' to thaw," Mason announced. "I'm glad. It'll be a change an' relief."

They reached the winter grazing grounds, and Mason and Miles began a systematic round-up of the little herd. Jimmie, ever anxious to do his share, rode on ahead and assisted in driving the animals toward the coulee they had used as a base of operations. It was not a difficult thing. He was amazed at the change in the cattle. They had grown thin, so thin that their ribs could be counted.

They were vicious of temper, too, and Jimmie shuddered a little as he saw the frenzied look in their eyes. At one point he came upon a cow and calf lying in the shelter of a rock. The calf was newly born, and both calf and mother were dead. Their carcasses had been torn by wolves, or coyotes. There were tracks of some big bird in the snow near by also.

One bull resisted his best efforts to drive it into the coulee. The animal insisted upon veering off, racing madly away from the lad. The thrill of the chase rather pleased Jimmie. It warmed him to ride hard, to wave his arms and shout at the refractory beast. But already his father and Miles had begun their closing in operations. Before them ambled most of the herd. It was a matter of pride with Jimmie that the steer should not evade him.

So he clenched his teeth and pounded against his pony's ribs with his heels. They flew in pursuit of the steer, closed down upon it, Jimmie shouting and waving his arms and forcing the animal to veer in the desired direction.

Mason called encouragement, and that pleased the lad. He would offer more than just a good effort, he thought; he would offer them this obstinate creature as a member of the herd. The race carried them over the plains and out of the shelter of the coulee banks. The wind was cold there, as Jimmie rode, but the lad saw that his father was about to come to his aid, and he wanted to master the steer before that was necessary.

Steer and pony were running neck and neck, Jimmie shouting out and lashing his hand at the steer's head. Mason rode behind them perhaps a hundred yards.

Suddenly he saw Jimmie's pony slip on the uncertain footing. His heart seemed to stand still as he watched. The pony slid, went to its knees, stumbled up to its feet again, then lost its footing entirely and went into a rolling fall. Miles had driven the cattle into the coulee and did not hear Mason's cry.

The father saw the form of Jimmie lying, apparently stunned, on the snowy ground. He spurred forward rapidly, then bellowed a command to his horse. The steer, seeing

what it sensed was victory in its obstinate treachery, saw also that its tormentor was down, and still.

It wheeled in its tracks, lowered it wide horns after the manner of its kind, and charged upon its motionless and defenseless prey. Mason's face went livid; he bellowed again and again as he dashed that short, yet too great, distance. He fumbled for his revolver, but his hands were cold and incased in mittens.

The mad steer lunged on, struck the motionless body of the boy, trampled upon it in passing, then whirled to renew the attack. Mason fired and creased the steer's haunch with the shot. It lumbered off, snorting defiance. The man dropped from his horse beside the crumpled lad. A moan crossed his lips as he saw the marks of red on the snow, realized that Jimmy's body was strangely twisted and very, very still.

CHAPTER XIV.

RUMBLINGS.

AS Mason knelt above the twisted form of his son, something in his mind seemed to snap. It was as though a curtain had suddenly been lifted before his eyes and there was disclosed to him a new spectrum. Agonized as he was, deeply as he loved Jimmie, his first thoughts were not of the lad.

"God!" he muttered, and the word was a prayer. It found source in the vision of a face that was before him. Not the face of Jimmie, but the face of Jennie Mason. He suddenly recalled how that patient, sacrificing face had altered in the last year. Jennie was not the same, the price he had extracted from her was too much.

He ran his calloused hand over his own face and suddenly realized that he had neglected to shave for weeks and weeks and that his features were hidden behind a coarse, unkempt beard. For the first time, he saw himself as Jennie might be seeing him. He had been a slave driver, a martinet who, because of his greater strength, had borne down upon those he loved with ruthless leadership.

After all, could the valley mean as much to them as to him? All the little evidences of growing discontent suddenly assumed their proper dimensions before his eyes. Just that morning, Miles had rebelled! In his ears rang the protest of Jennie against bringing Jimmie on this very trip.

He visualized her again poking at the logs in the fireplace, withholding by sheer courage of heart the protest that seethed within her breast. And now? What could he say? What could he do? With all the dynamic force of his nature he repented, but repentance had come too late. Here on the ground before him was another penalty that the valley had exacted; another blow at Jennie Mason, and such a blow as never could heal.

The revelation consumed but a moment and brought Mason back to Jimmie. His breath came in short gasps, and it seemed to him that his heart had leaped into his throat and was beating there, frantically, fearfully, chokingly beating in his throat.

He slid his arms under the little body and partially raised it. He moaned at the limp and inert manner in which it lifted to his strength. Then he moaned again as the pale lips of the boy moved, and a faint, plaintive, incoherent cry attested the pain that pierced even his unconsciousness.

Tears ran onto Mason's beard, and he suddenly became hysterical. He laid the boy back on the ground and rose. In his hand he held the revolver, and his eyes were wild. At some distance stood the steer, gazing back at them much as though contemplating the havoc it had wrought and wondering if it dare attack again. Mason shouted in a raucous, hoarse tone; then he charged the animal.

But the steer did not retreat. Instead, it pawed the snow with its hoofs, throwing streams of it into the air—dirty, earth-stained snow it was, and it fell on the animal's back and seemed to anger it the more. Then it lowered its horns again and braced itself for battle.

Mason lunged ahead. He was cursing, a thing he seldom did, and his voice was hoarse, cracked, strangling. He got close to the steer before he fired. It was a somewhat blind shot fired by hatred and mad

frenzy rather than determined aim. But it took effect, and the steer bellowed in pain, sank to its knees, struggled, then rolled onto the ground.

Mason reached it. With his bare fists he beat upon its emaciated sides until the thunder of blows boomed like thumps upon a bass drum. He pounded long after the steer was dead—pounded until his great fists were swollen—and, despite the cold, perspiration dotted his brow and dripped onto his whiskers and thence to his muffler, where soon it froze.

It was Miles who brought the man back from his frenzy. Miles who appeared at his side with frightened face and unsteady voice, and who held the form of Jimmie in his arms.

"Hell, Mason," the man was shouting, "are you plumb crazy? Is that damn nonsense goin' to help the lad? Git up, you fool! We gotta git this boy home right quick; he's hurt!"

Mason rose in dazed fashion. "Hurt?" he gasped. "Hurt? Ain't he—dead—Tom?"

"Not yet. He's plumb hurt, though. Come—git goin', Jim!"

They mounted, and Mason insisted upon carrying the boy, while Miles led his pony. Huddled into his father's arms, Jimmie stood his pain valiantly. Consciousness came to him, then fled as his ravaged body throbbed to the agony of motion. Once he tried to speak, but the effort was too much and he smiled a trifle as he looked at the bearded face above him.

During the ride Mason gained some control of himself, but he was obviously changed. He muttered to himself a good deal, and Miles, riding silently beside him and glancing often at the boy, carried a deep wrinkle on his forehead and a peculiar, confused look in his eyes. They reached the valley during mid afternoon, and Mason saw that Jennie was watching for them.

He saw her wave a hand in welcome, then apparently see that Jimmie's saddle was empty and that Mason himself carried the lad. Heedless of the cold, she ran toward them. For an hour past Mason had been having chills. The perspiration had dampened his clothes and then turned cold and clammy. Chills ravaged him now, but sight of Jennie running toward them in terror sent a hot flash through his whole being.

She looked mutely up at him, her eyes veritable pools of living agony. He tried to speak, but his voice died out in his throat.

"A steer, Jennie," Miles managed to say—"a steer trampled him when his hoss fell. Jim killed the damn steer—"

Her scraggly hair wind-blown, her clothing whipped about her by the bitter cold breeze, Jennie Mason raised her arms silently. Into them, just as silently, Mason laid the still form. She saw the blood stains on the clothing; felt the lifeless inanition of her boy. For a fleeting second she met Mason's look, then his eyes dropped and he made an effort to speak again.

Jennie looked down at the white face in her arms, a great sob rose from deep within her. Jimmie opened his eyes at the sound. He smiled wanly again, and for the first time managed to speak.

"Gee, ma," he mumbled slowly, "I'm—glad—it's you!"

She carried the lad to the house; laid him on his bed, and tenderly undressed him. Mason and Miles both came in as soon as the horses had been placed in the lean-to. The warmth had brought clouds that hung over the mountains, and the air was filled with the feel of snow. Jennie Mason refused their aid, and they went disconsolately to the fireplace and stirred up the logs.

Mason was cold and hot by spells, but he did not heed it. His mind was tortured by a million things he had suddenly realized. For the first time, just as it had been with the leaves on the trees, he knew that a condition had disclosed itself to him with inexplicable spontaneity. He seemed unable to detect evolution, only to stumble upon bare facts after they had become set in the concrete of time.

Jennie seemed to have shrunken in size. Her shoulders were stooped unbelievably and her breast sunken flat. Her face had a wearied, haggard cast that he saw for the first time for what it was.

"Soon as the snow clears we'll make a trip to the fort, Tom," he mumbled rather foolishly. "We'll be seein' folks—an' things, huh? Mebbe git Jennie some cloth fer a dress—"

Miles looked at the man, his eyes still steeped in that peculiar light, his forehead still wrinkled.

"You're shiverin', Jim," he announced ultimately. "You got cold. Better take a drink an' break it up."

He rose and got the whisky which they had brought from the fort. At that juncture Jennie Mason called out for Betty, and the child went into the room where Jimmie was and remained there to aid the woman. Miles brought the bottle and Mason drank, choking over the strong liquor and shuddering as its effect ran through his system. Then Miles took a drink himself.

Darkness came, and with it the snow began to fall again. It streaked past the window, and, to Mason's fevered eyes, it looked like phantoms of the night trying to peep through and gauge with him the havoc that had been wrought. He hated it. Once he rose and went to the window and peered out. He cursed again.

Miles had recourse to the bottle, and drank deep.

"Better take another drink, Jim," he said, a little thickly. "Damn bad weather, this! You got fevered up a'ready, Jim!"

Mason drank again, this time coughing after the raw liquid had seared his throat.

Miles also drank, then they sat before the fire once more, each casting furtive glances at the door to the room from where sounds of the battle for little Jimmie's life reached them. Betty carried warm water back and forth, brought cloth of which Jennie Mason made bandages. Frequently the thin, trembling voice of the lad reached them, and it was fraught with suffering.

Miles hiked his log chair closer to Mason and whispered: "Women can't onderstand a damn thing, Jim! Look at my wife! Don't let this worry you overmuch. Things like that has gotta happen!"

Mason did not answer. His shoulders shook as though from some inward convulsion, and he glanced again at the room. Then he walked to the window, peered out, and cursed softly again. After that he poked the blazing logs and muttered: "Coldest day yet! Colder'n hell, Tom—I killed that steer—they ain't winterin' any too good."

At the tone of his voice Miles lay back in his chair. Then he drank again, wiping his mouth clumsily with the back of his hand. He said something that Mason did not understand. He did not repeat it, and there was silence for quite a time.

Mason coughed sharply, after that. Miles pressed the liquor toward him again, mumbling something about needing it to offset the chill. Mason waved it aside impatiently, rose and peered through the window once more, then coughed in a paroxysm that shook his great shoulders and left his pallid face flushed in the cheeks.

Finally he seemed to reach a decision and went toward the room where Jennie Mason worked. He did not enter, the woman met him at the door:

"His chest is hurt," she said listlessly, "all bruised and twisted. I'm hopin' it's only broken ribs. He ain't bled through the mouth any, thank God! His arm is broke. I've done the best I could!"

Once again he tried to answer her and could not. It was in her eyes that he found defeat. Over her shoulder he saw the form of his boy, and regarded the pale face and the bandages. At the side of the bed sat Betty, and her eyes were tear-filled as she looked at Jimmie.

Jennie Mason did not prevent him from going to the lad, but he knew, somehow, that she did not want him to do so. He resented it, was on the point of asserting himself, then caught that look in her eyes again, and slowly returned to the fire.

Miles shook his head when they were alone again:

"I tell you, women ish hell, Jim," he mumbled, waving an unsteady hand to emphasize his point. "They can't unner'sthand thesh kinda things like men." He raised the bottle to his lips and held it there too long. Mason walked to the window again, and when he returned he ran his hand over his forehead. His step was unsteady, his eyes too bright, his face mottled.

Presently the woman came to them. She

looked surprisingly small there in the flickering light from the fire and contrasted to the big men.

"He's sleepin'," she said in worn voice. "I'm hopin' he'll come through."

They could find no answer, and Jennie Mason suddenly noticed the bottle, smelled the pungent odor of the whisky. She glanced sharply at Miles, and her lips set in a straight line. For a moment she stood thus, and Miles attempted some sort of speech designed to turn aside her wrath. His face had the expression of a schoolboy caught at mischief of some sort. Jennie Mason seized the bottle and held it against her body.

"Go to bed, you drunken fool!" she barked suddenly at Miles. "I never knowed such a coward in all my life—such a poor, hidin', damn coward!"

The words fell from her lips like hot coals. Miles, frightened, much as though he expected to be whipped, gazed up at her in outraged dignity which instantly melted into fear as he met her eyes. His lips moved and he mumbled something, but even as he spoke he rose from his chair and started for his room.

"Wh' thuh hell, Jim," he grumbled, waving his hand again. "How'sh she 'spect tuh talk t'me li' that?"

Jennie Mason started toward him and he retreated, stumbled against the heavy table that his own hands had assisted in building, then hurried into his room and shut the door. The woman, a sneer of contempt wreathing her lips, turned toward her husband. She looked into his fever-ridden eyes, his mottled face.

"You're sick," she said steadily, "I'll git you somethin'."

"It's a damned lie!" he snarled. "I aint the kind that gits sick! I'll be goin' to bed—to-morrow I'll chop some wood an' haul it down to thuh house. It's snowin' again; we may need it."

She stood motionless as he walked unsteadily to his room. Presently she sat down in the chair Miles had vacated. She set the whisky out of sight under the chair, and made no move to follow her husband.

With a rush of cold air and snow the door of the house burst open. Jennie Mason rose quickly and looked into the face of the Cheyenne trapper, who spoke a little English. With him was another savage, who frightened her tremendously. His head was covered by a set of elk antlers, his face streaked with hideous paint. From one ear hung a full set of wolf claws, from the other the bloody foot of a rabbit.

"Little paleface catch um hurt," the trapper said. "Me bring medicine man. Heap fix um, little paleface."

Jennie Mason did not pause to ask how they knew of the accident. She knew merely the wild superstitions of these men, the incessant conjuring they might do, thus waking her boy from the sleep he needed most.

"Little paleface fixed," she said, evenly. "Big paleface need medicine man."

She pointed toward Mason's room. The Indian looked surprised, but the light in the woman's eyes seemed final. She was still pointing toward the door, and there was something imperial in the pose. He caught the hideous medicine man by the arm and led him into Mason's room. Then Jennie Mason went in to her son again, and closed and barred the door behind her.

Late into the night she could smell the pungent odor of herbs that the Indians were boiling over the fireplace.

CHAPTER XV.

SUMMER.

THE next morning dawned cold and the air was filled with flying snow. But the very cold had changed some; it was damp, and presaged warmer weather. Jennie Mason found the red trapper waiting at the fireplace when she came forth. He rose as she entered the room. Making a circular motion about his temple with his finger, he nodded toward Mason's room.

"Spirit take him," he grunted. "Loco spirit speak in head. Medicine man 'fraid. Go away. Too bad."

Without waiting for her reply he stalked to the door and went out. Jennie Mason recalled the superstition of the Indians toward people whose mind was affected. She sensed that her husband was delirious, and started toward his room. The door of Miles's room stood partially open, and she

could hear his sterterous breathing. She went to the chair and found that the bottle was gone. Her face set.

Mason was sick. His skin was dry and hot, his lips cracked with fever. He mumbled something about a steer, and, though Jennie Mason could not understand, he frequently mentioned having killed it with his bare hands and beaten it until its body crushed under his fists and its eyes were wide and cold and blank.

She nursed him as best she could. When he coughed he raised blood, and she knew that pneumonia had set in, and that he must be kept warm, but given fresh air to breathe. She divided her time between him and Jimmie.

The lad, naturally strong, and of rare courage, mended. His arm knitted and his chest improved. The bruised and torn flesh which had been trampled under hoofs, healed. He became bright and cheery, and related to Betty the adventure which had so nearly cost him his life. In a week he walked about the house, but he could not twist his body without pain, and that lasted even until the thaws finally came and the sun grew warm.

Miles had changed. He could not forget, apparently, the words Jennie Mason had said to him when he had turned again to drink. He helped all he could, but his mind seemed far away, and his attitude indicated the shame he felt. She said nothing to him of the matter again.

He did the manual labor about the place, rode out to herd the cattle every few days. One day he told her that three calves had been born, and were going to live. She nodded agreeably, and said that she was glad. Then he told her that half the herd had strayed beyond finding or lay dead about the lower plains.

Mason was delirious for a week. Then he overcame the dread illness and, though his frame had shrunken and his face was pale, he mended quickly once he started. It was an occasion when Miles helped him out to the fireplace the first evening that he left his bed. He sat there for some time listening to Jennie Mason's voice as she taught the two children from the school-books they had brought in the Conestoga.

Through his mind passed all the thoughts that had come to him during the hours he had lain convalescent. Many of them were tender thoughts; things that might make reparation to Jennie Mason for all that she had suffered. But her silence was forbidding, it seemed to him. Except in the reporting of the progress little Jimmie made in his recovery she never made mention of the accident.

But Mason knew that her resentment had not cooled. He could see that she had determined upon certain things which, until necessary, she would not mention. The thought bothered him. In the old days, when they had had nothing, she had been different.

Now that they had a home of their own and there was a future before him, he felt that she should regard him differently; that she should recognize in him a man of greater importance and one with a real and definite substance.

This peculiar psychology of ownership he kept to himself, feeling that Jennie Mason should see it herself. Unwittingly he matched these thoughts against those of hers which she kept to herself. He drew a mild satisfaction from that. But he had a feeling of uncertainty, too. Never had he seen her as she was that day they brought Jimmie home.

As the lad grew well the horror of that day faded in Mason's recollection. He told himself that, at best, it was but an accident, and he was in no wise accountable. Thinking such thoughts banished from his mind the resolutions he had made while lying quiet. His silence became as great as hers. But he sensed that, though she made every sacrifice uncomplainingly, she would not let him send Jimmie into danger again.

The weather warmed rapidly. The ice went out of the stream and made fantastic piles far down toward the end of the valley. The snow was soft, clinging, melting like a vast wet blanket over the valley. With the passing of the ice the stream became a small river, overflowed its low banks, and swept, a muddy torrent, through the snow and mire.

They had difficulty in moving about, and

Miles took all one day to reach the herd and return. When he got back he reported that the stream was treacherous with quicksand, and that he had very nearly lost his horse. There were but nineteen animals left of the herd, and four of these were calves.

As his strength returned, Mason brought from the storeroom the seed of potato, radishes, and corn that he was to plant.

"They been kept a long time," he said, "our crop won't be anywheres near as good this year as next. The second plantin' will be the one!"

Into his eyes came again the almost fanatical longing to feel the dirt of the valley under his feet, to touch the soil that he would cultivate. With the passing of each day the snow lowered about the house, and he tinkered with his plow, his implements. Once again he forgot everything but the work ahead. His face grew ruddy once more, his shoulders straightened. When he spoke it was of the work ahead.

The snow clung to the hills until early May. Then, though the breeze was warm and the sun pleasant and bright, the valley was a veritable quagmire as the deep-seated frost oozed upward. One night in early June, when the moon shone bright and clear and the 'poorwills chanted their lay outside as they fled about in search of their insect diet, Mason heard the clear song of a thrasher in the brush.

He sat up in bed, went to the window and gazed out. Once more came the clear notes. He knew that summer had come; that soon he would plant and the valley would see waving corn, potatoes. He laughed deeply, a note of triumph in his voice. Then he walked to the door and stepped out into the night.

"God, it's good!" he said earnestly, "the smell o' the ground! Rich, fertile ground—soon I'll show 'em what I can do here!" He scarcely realized himself that he meant Jennie Mason, that underlying his words was acceptance of what he took to be the challenge of her silence.

Suddenly she appeared at the door, her body wrapped in a faded gown.

"Anythin' wrong, Jim?" she asked uneasily.

"Wrong?" he laughed. "God above, Jennie, everythin' is right! Right! Smell the air, the sweet odor o' earth an' grass bein' reborn! Wrong?" Once again he laughed. "There's a thrasher singin', Jen, hear it? Summer's here!"

Hardly realizing it, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"You better be gettin' your rest, Jim," she said slowly. "I thought you mighta been feelin' bad when I heard you up!"

He bit his lip, choking back impulsive words that rushed to his tongue. He was ashamed of the feeling he had shown, ashamed of the kiss he had bestowed. She went into the house and, shortly, he followed. When he had returned to bed he could feel his cheeks burning with shame for the kiss. He promised himself that he would not kiss her again—ever. She did not want him to.

She hated him, he thought, and attributed the whole thing to Jimmie's accident. She was unreasonable! He had tried to show her affection; he had kissed her and the caress had been received in apathy. It was almost an insult, he thought!

Then he promised himself great things. He would conquer this country, with its terrific winters, its deep snows, its lonely weeks and months. And when he had conquered, what then? What would there be left her but to acclaim him, to beg his caresses and be proud in the possession?

It never occurred to him that his caress was for the thrasher who sang in the brush, for the warm air, the coming of summer and the opening of his battle to achieve. He saw nothing of that. All he knew was that he had been happy, and had kissed Jennie, and she had not responded.

He worked hard that summer. They brought the diminished herd into the valley early. He knew that the winter losses had been heavy. The herd had suffered vastly on the winter grazing grounds and, in addition to that, they had been compelled to slaughter several of them for food. He told himself that their diet during the winter coming would be better because vegetables would be fresh.

While the ground still clung to his boots, he plowed. His face glowed as he saw the

richness of the soil. He planted his corn first. The air was warm, hundreds of birds flitted about the valley filling the day with their melodies, encouraging him on when his back ached with the strain of toil. He smelled of the ground when he returned to the house at night. The fresh soil clung to his boots and his hands were frequently caked with it where, for sheer love of it, he had taken it up and fondled it.

Of the horses they released when winter came, they were able to recover but three. These had grown wild so that both men had several falls before the little beasts would submit to the saddle again. Mason never got them where they would haul a plow.

As soon as the planting was done, therefore, he erected a much larger shelter than the old lean-to and, working from dawn until dark, and later at times, he cut hay from the grass that abounded and stored it in the lean-to. It was mighty work, work that called for a man's doing, but bred a man in the doing.

Mason was happy. He would call in friendly fashion to the important blackbirds that strode about the valley, listen to the silver notes of woodland thrushes, chortle in mock criticism of the medley of unmusical notes sputtered by brilliant hued yellow-headed grakles as they settled into the trees after feeding.

And at night he would lie and listen to the boding call of the 'poorwills as it flashed from the shadows of the woodlands and valley. It was a great country, a beautiful one. Lonely, yes. But that must change. Jennie might have forgotten those ever-increasing streams of Conestogas that were lumbering westward across the plains, but not Mason himself!

This country would develop. People would settle here and loneliness would change into a new life where riches would be theirs for a few years of labor now.

He had his setbacks. Miles faltered in the labor some and, though they aided each other considerably, Mason's side of the stream showed twice the work that was evident on Miles's. Late in the summer they finished his house and he moved in, though Betty spent most of the time at the Mason home studying under the patient guidance of the mother of Jimmie.

The corn did particularly well, the potatoes not badly. The rest of the things he had set nearer the river and he noticed that they were not thriving. It worried him. The cattle, too, did not improve, and frequently when a calf was foaled, the mother and calf both would die. He found the secret in the water they used at the house. It was alkali. The evaporation of the snow and the swelling of the river seemed to have washed the deadly salt down into the valley.

It was a crushing blow, but he took it in silence. They went into the second winter better equipped than for the first, but the outlook was dark, at best. The alkali had saturated the ground except on the hilly sides of the valley. Miles lost most of his crops, but Mason shared with him, and promised better for next summer.

When the heat grew intense Miles was painfully injured in an encounter with a mad steer. He was saved from serious hurt by Mason, then they both saw that loco weed had been found and eaten by the animals. Their eyes became inflamed, their sides gaunt, fever gripped them and they became delirious. Neither man knew what to do about it.

The herd became a pitiable sight. One day three of them were found dead near the river, their tongues lolling, swollen, from their mouths, their eyes bulging. Between loco weed and the alkaline water they had drunk, death was a relief for them. Mason became morose, silent.

Jimmie helped vastly in the work, but his father never made a move to direct him too much. That inner feeling was dominant; if ever Jennie and himself came to loggerheads, he felt, it would be over Jimmie. His wife would stand anything else without complaint.

They harvested the crop and were well enough supplied for the winter that again must come. The house had been improved, the horses cared for in the well constructed lean-to. Their food would be better than the first winter. On the whole, Mason felt pleased despite the alkali and the loss of the herd.

"We'll slaughter half a dozen, Tom," he said quietly, "an' turn the rest loose to wander where they will. I still got quite a bit o' money to buy more with when we're ready for 'em."

One day they stood again on the step that led into the house and once more the trees were stark and the birds had gone and the valley was desolate. The whisper in the wind was sullen. A snowflake suddenly drifted before them. It seemed to materialize before their very eyes. Jennie Mason said:

"It's winter again, Jim."

"Yeah, so it is," he said slowly, his eyes cast upward toward the gray heavens. "Well, we're better set fer it this year, Jennie. We've come a long ways this summer!"

Her eyes traveled toward the stream at the lower end of the valley and his, as if drawn by a magnet, followed. There were the bleached bones of half a dozen steers.

He said nothing, turned abruptly and walked into the house. When she set the dinner on the table she saw that, for the first time since they had come to the valley, Mason had shaved.

CHAPTER XVI.

TIME.

THE weather grew cold, but the snow held off unexpectedly. Over the valley came again the honking of geese, and Jennie Mason liked to stand in the door, wrapped in a garment she had made of a buffalo skin, and watch them as they fled for the southern horizon. Their great wings flapped so wildly, so incessantly, that she was fascinated. They seemed as tireless as Mason himself when he was at work in the fields.

She wondered where they were going, what sort of country they would find. She knew that they flew far and wondered if they, in their migration, might pass over farms where there was no alkali; see from their lofty road villages and towns where people met and talked and where there were women who dressed as women loved to do, and who went to church Sundays.

The Indian trapper appeared one day and asked that Jimmie accompany him on a goose hunting trip up the river. Mason agreed without thought. Jimmie darted for his warm clothing and his rifle. Jennie Mason rose from her seat:

"Jimmie ain't goin'," she said with astounding finality.

The lad paused, disappointed, a look of inquiry on his face. Mason gulped, started to speak, then desisted. The Indian muttered something gutturally, then flashed a significant look at Mason.

"He ain't goin', Jim," Jennie Mason repeated evenly. Mason shrugged impatiently and spoke to the warrior:

"She ain't wantin' the kid to go," he said. "I guess he better stay here."

The Indian laughed hoarsely, a light of unbelief in his eyes. Then he stalked out of the house. Mason turned to his wife:

"He can't understand how a squaw gives orders," he said a little sharply. "I said Jimmie could go."

"I said he couldn't," she said in calm, low tones. Jimmie returned silently to the fireplace. "I left him go once," Jennie Mason said after a moment.

Though he made no response Mason knew that, inadvertently, he brought affairs to a passage at arms. His long held suspicions had been verified. He could ask Jennie to remain in the valley and starve, and she would not complain. He could ask of her the drudgery of the house, the loneliness, the stark emptiness of the years, and she would not demur. But where Jimmie was concerned, she was in control.

He saw that her docility was not lack of courage or determination. Herself she had given without limit; she was his; his to own, to drive, to dominate. But Jimmie was hers, and where he was concerned, only she mattered. He did not like it, exactly. He felt that, as father, he was head of the house. But that queer something about Jennie just then prevented his mentioning the matter.

That evening the trapper returned with a goose. Mason greeted him warmly, glad of a change and some one to talk to. He took the goose and handed it to Jennie.

"Could you roast it, Jen?" he asked, and, without thought of the work involved, he added: "Make some o' that bread stuffin', will you? That'll be fine fer us all!"

She took the goose, cleaned it, and worked until after dark cooking it. Jimmie stood at her side, and she talked listlessly with him, finally telling him of the place they used to live back in the East. Just before she finished she heard Mason go to the door and hail Miles to come for the feast.

Soon Jimmie and Betty were playing together. The dinner was served and greeted with huge appetite by the men. When they had eaten they gathered about the fire smoking and Jennie cleaned up. They were still talking when she had finished, but she did not join them. She walked on through into her bedroom and was joined there by the children.

The wind howled that night, and it grew very cold. Soon the rattle of hard snow sounded on the windows and the roof. The horses stamped noisily in the lean-to. The men, apparently, did not hear it, and Jennie, fearing that something was wrong, wrapped her coat around her and went to see. The ground already was white and she saw a slinking form run away from the lean-to as she approached. Tracks showed it to be a puma, but as soon as it had left, the horses quieted.

The storm lasted four days, and winter had gripped the valley when it passed. They were not uncomfortable in the house. Mason kept busy tinkering things and performing winter chores. Jimmie took an interest in cooking and would help his mother with the housework while she told him of the East and the schools and the churches.

Somehow the monotonous repetition dragged on. Winter faded slowly, the air grew warm again, the ice went out of the river. The birds called again from the bush and Mason rose in spirits in direct response to it. The valley was beautiful in summer.

The crop was little better, and Mason postponed the trip to the Fort to buy cattle. Though he hid his fears under the plea of bettering the valley and being certain of himself before he bought more animals, his eyes carried a worried look that gave the impression that he had lost confidence where cattle were concerned.

But his love of the valley burned on undiminished. He gathered more crops again than Miles, taking a strange pride in the fact even while he resented Miles inability, or lack of energy. Change overtook them all. Miles was becoming morose, sullen, and remained long in his own house. Mason's beard grew again and it was wild, tangled like the brambles of the hills.

Jimmie had grown taller by inches and, though his arm had knitted crooked, he had broadened and was stronger. He took a great delight in acting as protector against any menace to Betty Miles. They romped the valley together when the lad was not busy at chores. He made friends with the Indians and listened wide-eyed to their tales of the wonders of the hills to the north and west.

When again winter sent its blasts through the valley there seemed a lethargy with which to greet it. The little colony of pioneers had become habituated to hardship. They found deprivation measured against deprivation, and the lesser of these they came to regard as luxuries.

Mason battled with the valley and its alkali death. They lived in moderate comfort because the limited crops were ample for their needs and the house was well built. Sometimes it seemed to Jennie Mason that the sun, as it sank below the horizon and thus released deep shadows that crept over the valley, as though they might have been hidden in invisible lairs, was like a mighty wink of fate. A token of defeat, of lingering deterioration, of slow, inexorable death.

When Jimmie was twelve Mason, now stooped from toil and with his hair and wild beard showing streaks of gray, announced that they would go to Laramie. The word seemed to render them all speechless. Jimmie looked with something of the awe of his childhood. Miles gulped unbelievingly. Jennie Mason's hands trembled as she worked.

"I'll take you all along," Mason said. "We'll see what's happenin' down there.

Mebbe folks has already started out fer here. I'll file on this valley as my own, too! We'll drive back some cattle!"

Then Miles found words:

"I'd look for'd to it if you said we'd drive back some ten-foot devils with tails that rattled, Jim!" he cried. "My God! When you mentioned that there fort—I know how damned lonely I been!"

They started out as soon as the spring planting had been done. The Conestoga, satined and streaked with the passing of time, responded to Mason's expert touches. Weeks had been spent in the planning of that which must be brought back. Life had seemed to energize the settlers as soon as plans got under way.

At first the horses objected strenuously to the harness, but such matters appeared small to the excited travelers. They crossed the bad lands with their eyes and hearts in Fort Laramie. The Indian trapper joined them, as did several of his tribe. They felt more than safe.

Buffalo herds furnished ample meat; the Indians killed them with arrows and cooked them over an open fire. Jennie Mason laughed at the endless questions Jimmie asked. When she laughed Mason noticed it and came to her.

"You're a diff'rent woman, Jen," he said not unkindly. "You got to actin' queer up in the valley!"

Her lips quivered with feeling, but she controlled herself. He detected a softened light in her eyes, and it encouraged him. Suddenly he knew that he, too, would welcome the sound of a new voice, the sight of a strange face. Quite clumsily he ran his heavy hand over her arm. There was tenderness in both the touch and the light in his eyes. She smiled up at him.

Impulsively he took her again, kissed her and held her with her feet off the ground. There seemed something almost girlish about her just then, and she laughed spontaneously and deliberately bent her head and kissed his lips.

"I wish you could see that beard, Jim!" she said.

That night he went into the wagon and, by copious use of her mending shears and not a little suffering at the hands of a dull razor, he shaved. When he returned to her, as she worked over the supper, she greeted him with a look of delighted surprise.

"You done it fer me, Jim," she said.

"'Course," he said uneasily, "why not?"

He laughed carelessly as she stood on tiptoe and kissed him again, but it was clear that he was pleased, infinitely pleased.

"You liked to have me kiss you this time," he said, a little of accusation in his tone.

"You kissed me, this time," she returned at once. "Kissed me 'cause I was me, not 'cause it was summer an' plantin' time!"

Once again he had that strange, inexplicable sense of having seen things in mature form, which had been growing under his very eyes unnoticed! He was baffled by it. Jennie seemed, now and then, to open new worlds to his blindness. He made no answer because he could think of none.

He ate his meal in silence and, to his surprise, Jennie was actually talkative. She hummed as she went about the work afterward. He wondered a little sullenly if she was not pleased because she knew that she had come off the better in their clash of minds and memories.

But when darkness fell he took her hand and led her off into the shadows and they sat together for a long time, while the fire died away and the moonlight gained ascendancy over the prairie world. Neither spoke much, but their hands remained together.

They reached the Fort during the late afternoon, and were greeted as joyously and with as great gusto as they had been sent upon their way those years past. The captain asked innumerable questions, to which Mason made dogged answers that they were doing well and would become rich.

He learned of the Overland Stage lines and laboriously filed his rights to the water and land he spotted on the map. This time his word was accepted at greater value than had been his ideas on their last visit. Men listened attentively, and it seemed to him that several were interested in the country.

Jennie Mason got cloth for clothes, and, as Mason chided her about a desire to flirt with the men, she worked feverishly to fashion garments in which she could appear. There were white women at the Fort now. Several of them who remained there the year round. Talking with them, meeting them, relating her trials when Jimmie had been injured, and the manner in which she had worried along in the desolate valley, seemed as food to Jennie Mason.

Her eyes brightened, her cheeks took on new color. She talked freely with others, and the haggard, beaten light died out of her face. The women were kind to her.

They remained at the Fort for two weeks. Glorious weeks for all of them. Mason was hailed by the men as the developer of a new country. Members of the trains that stopped at the Fort came to him as they might have a seer, and asked his advice. He talked freely and always in terms of success and progress.

The day of their leavetaking was a gloomy one for all but Mason.

"When I git back," he announced to those who gathered to see them off, "the corn 'll be sproutin' up, potatoes will be growin', and I'll have to work fast to catch up. The ground is gittin' better every year."

When they looked for Tom Miles he had disappeared. As Mason looked for him one of the men of the Fort came up to him and handed him a scrawled letter. It was from Tom. It asked Mason and Jennie to take care of little Betty until he could return for her. It said that Miles was sure he never could do much with the valley.

Mason solemnly showed his wife the surrender. She hugged Betty close, and Jimmie patted the little girl's hand and assured her that they'd get along all right. Betty did not cry; she merely looked up at Jennie Mason and nestled her head close to the woman's bosom.

With the friendly Cheyennes serving as riders, Mason started sixty head of cattle out on the long drive to the valley. It gave him tremendous pride, somehow. At the Fort he had forged an iron with which he would brand the cattle. That was a custom which the captain said was a good one and had been inherited from the Spaniards.

Once again the Conestoga set out loaded with supplies. After paying for all these in addition to the cattle, Mason still had two hundred dollars left from the money earned repairing wagons.

"It 'd take a mighty long time to make more'n a livin' from the valley, Jim," his wife suggested as he mentioned this.

"Look ahead, Jen," Mason said with all his old enthusiasm. "I'm goin' to graze these cattle right up in the hills. They'll live, an' breed, an' when folks come into this country we'll sell thousands o' dollars' worth o' meat! You'll see!"

Then the wagon lurched on, and Fort Laramie faded behind them; and ahead lay the bad lands and the silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALKALI.

THEY made a good return trip. The Cheyennes showed an interest and willingness which surprised Mason. He had promised each of them a steer for his services.

Their first glimpse of the familiar valley was much as Mason had promised it would be. The corn was up, and the place had an almost Utopian calm and grandeur about it. The mere fact of their slight evidences of civilization in such a place lent an important atmosphere to the scene. After crossing the bad lands and creeping through the primeval foothills, the valley was a contrast worthy the name.

Yet, and perhaps neither of the two noticed it, both Mason and his wife changed the minute they arrived. Something of the old look entered Jennie Mason's eyes, and the man literally squared his shoulders and rode on the seat of the wagon to appraise all things with one flashing sweep of his eyes.

By some uncanny psychological conception, neither made mention of Miles's desertion. Mason rather thought that his wife could see things too much from Miles's

standpoint and too little from his own; but he said nothing about it.

They did not open Miles's house that summer at all. As soon as they arrived Mason made short work of stowing away the supplies. When that brief work was finished he brought out his worn boots and got into the clothes which Jennie Mason had learned to recognize as her husband labored in the fields.

"To-morrow I'll take a quick look round, Jen," he said, "just to make sure things ain't needin' quick attention. The next day I'll be ridin' the herd up into the hills a bit. They'll do well up there, an' I don't want to keep 'em down here too long."

She made no answer, and he raised his eyes impatiently.

"Didn't you hear me talkin' to ye?" he demanded testily.

It seemed that Jennie deliberately threw a damper on all his works.

"Yes, I heard you, Jim. I didn't see no answer was necessary. What else is there to do but what you said?"

He felt, somehow, that he had gained ascendancy for the moment. He pretended to be adjusting his boot, thus prolonging his stay in the room. With a suddenly found courage that impelled him, he broached a subject that had been on his mind for some time—since, in fact, Miles had deserted the valley.

"The work is goin' to be harder now, Jen," he said flatly. "With Miles gone, there's all the corn to be cut, an' all the rest. Jimmie'll have to take a hand."

"Of course," she answered.

He was surprised at her submissiveness—thought, perhaps, that she was getting over her anger about the accident those years ago, though he now and then saw her rubbing Jimmie's bent arm thoughtfully.

Mason, content with what appeared to him as a victory, left the house. He worked hard all that day, but when he came in for his dinner his eyes beamed with that fond light and he talked as doggedly as ever.

"We own this now, Jen," he said. "I filed at the Fort. It's what we used to talk about when we was first married—our own home."

"Yes." She said the word simply, yet he caught a bad meaning from it. His face flushed hotly.

"How old was Mrs. Miles when we started out in the wagon?" he asked irrelevantly.

"I dunno. 'Bout forty-five, I guess," she said.

Then he laughed shortly, and she caught sarcasm in his voice for the first time since she had known him.

"She was allus kickin', too," he said. "I guess it's the way with women folks after they git so old. Miles was right!"

She whirled upon him at the words, her face livid. Once again he sensed that weird fear of her; wished that he had not spoken so. But her control proved equal to his own. She caught the hot words that threatened to come, and said evenly, though in strained tone:

"He was right when he left this fool salt farm, Jim!"

His fists clenched at the words, and he rose. There was something splendid about him, something big and strong and resolute as the very hills about the valley. She saw that the black soil of the garden showed in the openings between his knuckles; there was an odor of earth about him.

He used a word she had never heard him say before except at prayer. They stood thus a moment, then Jimmie went to his mother's side and looked up inquiringly.

"Jennie," Mason said, after a moment, "every man that is a man wants a home; he wants to own it, to feel it, to build it up. This here is my home—I've worked like hell fer it."

"I've heard it said that men change when they git to ownin' things, Jim," she said listlessly.

"Change?" he demanded. "Yes, they change—they grow. They won't leave themselves be blinded by fool idees, Jennie. Have you an idee how hard I've worked fer this here valley? Do you think I've let pains an' hurts an' aches hold me back?"

"You've worked," she admitted. "Others have, too—"

"Complainin' again?" he sneered.

"I never complained, Jim," she retorted. "I never will. I married you, an' I'll stand by you, an' we'll travel the road to the end—as long as I got strength to lift a finger—"

He did not wait for her to finish, but stalked from the room, his great stooped shoulders swinging sidewise through the door as though he feared scraping them should he present their width to the opening.

Jennie Mason stood a long time after he had gone. Her fingers rubbed Jimmie's crooked arm again. Finally she went to the window and looked down into the corn field and saw her husband at work.

The next day the man drove the cattle into the hills, and she offered no complaint as Jimmie went with him. They took several of the Indians, and that night Jimmie told her how they had branded the steers and turned them loose. But for days and days Mason did not speak to her conversationally. He spoke only when it was necessary, and then in monosyllables.

The summer passed again, and Jennie Mason found herself making preparations for another long winter. Mason himself had seemed to grow weary, somehow. His face was growing haggard, too. From his eyes had gone the fevered light of joy; his mighty love for the valley. But he maintained his dogged silence, and the woman was unable to discover the cause of the change in him. She did not attribute it to their quarrel; it struck her that something else was at the bottom of it.

Jimmie rode often into the hills with his father when they rounded up the herd. Now and then he told her of branding a new calf, or, once, of how Mason and himself had rescued a steer from a bog of quicksand just as they had seen the man Brant do so long before.

And, as Jimmie began to take more and more of a part in the affairs of the farm —though Mason frequently called it the "ranch" now—Jennie Mason confided less and less in her son. It seemed to her that the valley, after having taken from her all that woman holds dear, now was exacting the last great tribute—her boy.

Many nights Mason puttered about the lean-to hours after she had dragged herself to bed. She would lie and listen to him, her eyes wide. The moon shone above her window in the early hours, and she gazed at it and wondered if its beaming face looked down upon Fort Laramie and the greater towns and villages of the east. One night she permitted herself the relief of tears. There was no definite thing about which to weep; only that she wanted to weep.

Jimmie crept into her room, put his arm about her, and crawled into her bed.

"Whatcha cryin' fer, ma?" he asked tremblingly.

For a moment she could not answer. She held him close, and her woman's heart longed for a caress. He kissed her time and again, and begged her not to cry. Finally he asked:

"Is it the alkali, ma? Is that it? That's what's the matter with pa!"

"What about the alkali, Jimmie?" she asked.

"Aw, I can't have you cry, ma!" the lad qualified. "Pa said not to tell—but the cattle is dyin' up in the hills, ma! It's alkali!"

"Alkali?" she muttered through her tears. From the lean-to came the sounds of Mason's toil. A vast sense of futility gripped her. Her eyes dried, but widened. "Alkali?" she repeated. "Pa says that's salt that dries everythin' up, Jimmie. Kinda blights all that it touches 'ceptin' cactus an' things like that. But there's so many kinds o' alkali—so many, many kinds, Jimmie—an' the kind in the hills is the easiest of all!"

He remained in her bed throughout the night, his bent arm tight across her body, his face pressed close against her shoulder. The moon passed on into the sky, and the shadows crept slowly over the bed. The sound of toil ceased, and Jennie Mason heard her husband come into the house. His step was lagging, and she wondered if he was tired. She kissed Jimmie's head tenderly—wondered how many of the cattle had died.

When fall came they opened Miles's house. Mason constructed a wide swinging door and knocked down the inner parti-

tions. Then he used the place for a combination toolhouse and stable. They went through the same preparations for winter. Jennie Mason thought that the same geese flew overhead; that she cooked the same one to eat!

Once again the snow held off. Mason went into the hills to the cattle and when he returned he was taciturn. He ate very little of the meal she prepared and when he had done he dropped sprawlingly into the log chair and gazed into the flames on the hearth. He did not even smoke his pipe and, as she cleaned the table and dishes, Jennie Mason saw that he ran his fingers continuously through his scraggly beard and his long, wiry hair.

Jimmie was relating to Betty Miles an experience he had had in the hills. At one point his memory needed prompting and he turned to his father and spoke. Three times he spoke, and the man in the chair did not hear him though he raised his inflection with each query. Then Jimmie looked peculiarly at his mother and went on with the story, heedless of the lost point.

Jennie Mason finished her work, sighed with fatigue, and sank into a chair. She spoke to Jimmie and the lad prodded the logs into greater flames. The air outside was sharp, almost to the freezing point. Mason still sat, his great, blunt, earth-stained fingers coursing now and then through his beard or up over his head. He seemed not to notice Jimmie as the lad worked at his feet.

It grew late and the children went to bed. Finally Jennie Mason laid aside her sewing and as she went to her room she bade her husband good night. He made no answer; did not hear. She watched the moon again that night and its light seemed cold and baleful.

Mason finally rose and she listened for his step. He went to the door and out onto the ground just as he had done that night when he heard the thrasher herald the coming of summer. He stayed for some time. It was cold and Jennie Mason was certain that he had not put on coat or hat. Finally she rose and followed him, wrapping herself once more in the buffalo skin.

He was seated on the log step, his hair blown by the sharp wind, his mighty shoulders stooped as he rested his elbows on his knees and burrowed his face into his horny palms.

"You'll be catchin' cold, Jim," she said softly. "You better come in."

"Alkali," he muttered, "alkali—everywhere! God Almighty, everywhere—there ain't no herd left, Jennie—they died!"

For a long moment she stood, a grotesque figure wrapped as she was. Then she leaned forward, ran her fingers through his hair, down onto his beard. His ear came to her touch and she ran her fingertips gently about its contour. Somehow, to her, the wiry hair felt soft and boyish. So they stood for some time, heedless of the cold.

The clear moon washed the valley in silver fire, the voice of the wind whispered of winter and cold and snow, but they heeded it not. The valley, the herd, all else but themselves seemed to have been submerged in a sea of unseen instantaneous discovery.

Suddenly Mason raised his great arm and she felt it encircle her limbs, felt herself drawn downward toward the man's lap. She sat on his knee and his arm remained about her waist, hers around his neck, her fingers still twining through his shock of unkempt hair. She felt his head against her breast and then, as though a mighty dam might have burst sending forth torrents of thunderous water, his great shoulders heaved and he sobbed.

She drew his head close to her, rested her tired cheek against it. For a long time he sobbed, just as little Jimmie might have sobbed, and his tears seemed to her to wash away all that was in the past. She was proud of them. She raised her face to the moon, finally, and it was suffused by a light that beggared even that luminous orb. Time and again she kissed his hair.

When his sobbing had diminished she rose, took his hard hand and he followed her quietly. She barred the door, looked to the fire while he stood still in the center of the room, watching her with something of reverence in his haggard face. Not through the whole tragic disclosure of destiny had she spoken a word.

Finally she led him to bed and all

through the night he, like little Jimmie, slept with his great head against her breast and she rubbed his hair until he slept, then lay for hours holding one of the fingers of his hand. The valley was still but for the soughing of the wind; now and then the barking of a fox. When she kissed the finger tenderly it was hard, lumpy, seemed to her to be as large as Jimmie's wrist.

She overslept the next morning and when she wakened he had gone and she heard him at work in the lean-to.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GROWTH.

JIMMIE was eighteen, Betty sixteen. The valley was unchanged except that the buildings were more weather-stained and the Conestoga stood like a gaunt skeleton in the lower valley. The canvas top hung in valiant shreds over the stark bows, they flapped in the valley breezes as though waving an inevitable farewell to those they once had served.

Mason was old. His eyelids hung far over his pupils and he had formed the habit of lifting them aside with his great fingers when he sought to gaze across the hills. Jennie Mason's hair had silvered, she was thin, bent, worn. In the summer time, the corn still waved on the valley sides and the stream wallowed ceaselessly toward the south.

In the winter time the winds howled and the snow banked high against the house. Then came long nights when naught occurred but the teaching of the younger people by Jennie Mason. The fireplace, blackened by years of use, the floors, worn now into billowing hummocks by the treading of feet, the lifeless buffalo robes, seeming to shrink within themselves against the rough log walls, all attested that greatest of all things, the passing of time.

Mason seldom spoke. There was in his bearing the note of failure. He kept on with the same dogged, fanatical determination, but he never attempted again to raise cattle. They never again had gone to the Fort. Once, two years before, two trappers had happened upon the valley and, with sight of the first white faces they had ever seen there, Mason painted a crude sign and nailed it over the door of the old Miles home. "Mason Farm and Ranch," it read.

Jimmie took Betty on long rides through the great hills. They grew up together in a spirit of camaraderie. They shared each other's secrets, such as they were. At various times, it had fallen to Jimmie's lot to do her services which showed an innate gallantry on his part. Once her horse had become mired and he had arrived none too soon.

Betty had been greatly frightened, and when Jimmie had brought her in safety to the bank of the upper stream, she had leaned against him and looked up into his eyes, stark terror transfusing her face.

His arms had been around her and he held her close. She tried to speak and could not. Because he could think of nothing else to do and because it pleased him particularly well to do it, he had kissed her lips.

The move brought some degree of order to her shattered faculties, at least. She laughed confusedly. Then he kissed her again and again and finally she drew away from him and they mounted and returned slowly to the valley. Both seemed immersed in strange thoughts of their own. Back at the farm they had told all about the incident except that part which terminated it. Each wondered why the other did not mention that, each was glad that it remained just between them.

There had come the time when Jimmie set out into the hills after a stallion that the Indian trapper wanted. He was gone for three weeks and both his mother and Betty paid a heavy penalty in worry. But he came back with the stallion and gave it to the Indian. As his reward for the horse, he exacted a deerskin suit for Betty. It was trimmed with wampum and she was beautiful in it.

Once again they had gone out in an attempt to trace down the illusive 'poorwills whose vagrant, boding cry crept to them from ever-varying directions. Out into the still woodland they pursued their doubtful hunt. To Jimmie there appeared to be

some spirit of beauty in the very air. Betty had worn her suit and he always felt differently toward her when she was garbed in that which he had won for her.

Though many weeks had passed since the episode of the quicksand, Jimmie recalled it now; that is, he recalled the kisses. Suddenly, there in the moonlight, as he stood listening for the next call of the bird, an overwhelming desire seized him to repeat those kisses. Almost roughly he caught her in his arms and drew her close.

He kissed her lips several times before she squirmed away from him. Then she looked into his face, placed the back of her hand against her lips.

"Why, why—Jimmie—why did you do that?" she asked breathless.

"I—I—gee, oh, Betty!" It was a perfectly incoherent answer yet she seemed to understand, and they walked back to the valley. Quite suddenly, as the light of the house showed in the darkness, Betty began to cry softly. Jimmie put his arm about her and told her that he was very, very sorry for what he had done. She did not complain of the caresses now and he seemed well able to comfort her.

Jennie Mason looked at the two intently as they entered the house. Mason himself scarcely noticed them except to say to Jimmie:

"You'd be better to git your sleep, son, 'stead o' chasin' round through the woods lookin' fer fool birds! We got plenty ahead o' us to-morrow!"

And so time had passed. It was as though the huge effort of Mason and his wife to conquer the valley and the hills had served only to scar the upper sides of the hollow and they hung, now, like parasites might hang to the body of something too vast to notice their presence. They were as tiny splashes of moss clinging to the trunk of a huge tree, living briefly in summer, never growing appreciably, then dying away in winter only to bloom momentarily again in summer; but growing older and weaker with each blooming and laying away nothing for that year when winter might prove too long.

Jimmie Mason slowly fitted into the farm routine. His shoulders had broadened until they were as great as those of his father. They were erect with the youth which the older man had poured so wholesomely into the alkali valley. He was strong, healthy, adventurous.

Though he had never complained of the tedious drudgery that, so far as he could see, brought no results other than bare food, his mind reached out over the valley sides and groped through his memories of Fort Laramie.

He longed to cast off the fetters which he himself did not understand. He sensed the bigger and broader life which seethed somewhere beyond the circumscribing hills that formed his sphere in life. Mason did not see this.

The man was still blinded by his pitiable ownership of the farm. He was like a man who had built his every dream around so much land, so many bushels of corn, and was quite content to permit any burden to be borne by others so long as that ownership remained real, that sense of proprietorship tangible.

But Jennie Mason did see it. It showed in her eyes, ever expressive, ever reflecting that which she felt. In some intangible manner which must have been traceable to weakness in Mason rather than direct strength in herself, she had retained a definite authority in matters where Jimmie was concerned. It was not that she asserted this authority; rather, Mason feared discovery of it in actual clash and it thus remained intact.

In all matters of the farm Mason ruled supreme. He did not so much as mention his plans until mention came in the form of instructions as to what was to be done. But, though, at times, Mason inwardly rebelled against it, Jennie had her way in the matter of Jimmie's education and the hours that he should toil on the farm while he was studying. Mason paid no heed to Betty Miles at all.

This was the condition when next a white face appeared in the valley. The coming of any one into the desolate and secluded place could not, of course, be heralded. They simply appeared. So it was with Tom Miles. He rode into the southern entrance to the place over the trail he

had so often traveled with Mason that first long winter when the little herd had been wintering on the lower plains.

Jimmie was the first to see him, the first to sense that here was a white man. The lad was working in the cornfield at the time and he dropped his tool with that avid interest which was as much a physical reaction as a mental joy. None of them seemed to realize, as time passed, that they turned their eyes often toward the East.

None of them sensed that this tendency but reflected their longing to contact with a world that lived and moved and breathed. That longing was wont to show itself in these spontaneous outbreaks when something other than routine came to pass.

Miles rode to the very door of the house and sat, even then, in his saddle as he looked down upon the others. Betty Miles looked at his face, then instinctively caught the coarse skirt of Jennie Mason in her fingers and twined it there, uncertainly.

"Well," Miles said after a time, "still at it, I see."

Much as though he was afraid that the others might disclose the failure which had visited them, Mason took the initiative:

"We ain't doin' bad, Tom," he insisted. "The corn is the best I ever seen, and we get better crops each year outen the ground down to'rd the river."

"Yeah," Miles drawled almost insolently, "yuh raise a damn slick alkali crop, Jim!" Then, without waiting an answer: "Hello, Betty, gal! Ain't yuh got a welcome fer your own pa?"

He slid from his horse and swaggered toward them. Leaning over, he kissed her rather hesitantly on the cheek. For some reason that Jimmie did not stop to analyze, the caress made him angry.

"I didn't know how yuh was goin' to receive me," Miles admitted after a moment, "so I didn't bring in my men." He spoke importantly, as though he sought to impress them with the fact that men worked for him. Apparently their reaction to the words was not all that he wanted and he said more: "Yeah, I coulda worked here just like you have, Jim. I'd had the same amount o' money, too! But I didn't. I'm like to gettin' rich now!"

Ostentatiously he unbuckled a money belt and weighed it before their eyes, laughing as he did so.

"You done well, Miles," Jennie Mason said evenly. "I'm glad. Glad fer Betty's sake." The manner in which she spoke brought a flush to Miles's tanned face.

"I had tuh leave 'er like that," he protested, "yuh know I never coulda made Jim see it. I'll pay yuh well fer her keep."

"She's done that ten times over what you ever could," Jennie said firmly.

"You've had a hard time, folks," Miles muttered in placatory tone. "I kin see it. Yuh'll never have nothin' but a hard time as long as yuh stay here!"

The more the man talked the more they could see the change in him. Each of them seemed to show their feeling in their faces and it was clear that, either Miles had changed for the worst or they had become so saturated with the living death of the valley that they could not justly appraise his growth.

"How you made your money, Tom?" Mason asked bluntly.

"Well," importantly, "in several ways! It ain't hard to make big money out here now, Jim. The country is growin' up plenty!

"The guv'ment is raisin' hell aplenty over the slavery thing, an' folks says that war is goin' tuh come shore as fate. Lots o' men that started fer Calif'orny tuh dig gold has met others comin' back. All o' them is stoppin' in this here country.

"The Overland stage lines is goin' tuh replace the Pony Express right soon—big things, Jim—by Gawd, git outa this valley an' mix in 'em!"

He waved his hands broadly, as if in an effort to embrace all the big things of which he spoke and which words he could muster failed to describe.

Mason went white at the blunt statement. It seemed to him that Miles had suddenly developed the temerity to mention a thing which had been kept sullenly quiet, the words were a sort of heresy, a ruthless dashing aside of curtains that long had hidden the hearts of that little family.

"Hell!" he snarled. "Git out, you say? Git out? Now, when the corn is comin'

so good an' my file has been registered? Give up a good home an' farm just to go gallivantin' across the plains carrying a little gold in a belt an' talkin' 'bout big schemes?"

There was such scorn in his voice that Miles shrunk within himself. Not so the others.

Jimmie asked several quick questions about the Pony Express, the Overland Stage, the impending war. Miles waxed enthusiastic in the answering. Jennie Mason told the man to call in his party, then she set about fixing food for them. Miles had returned, and four or five whiskered and picturesquely clad men camped down near the stream. As Jimmie worked she listened to his talk. Jimmie showed avid interest, Mason himself sat hunched in the log chair and gazed resolutely into the fireplace.

They talked late into the night, Miles being uninterrupted except for a question asked him now and then. The camp fire down by the stream died down until the men asleep on the ground showed like logs beside it. Still they talked.

The valley seemed to whisper of the presence of white men. The whole world in which they lived seemed altered. The very house seemed alive and reaching forth to embrace this first taste of a world that had been almost forgotten.

"It's late," Miles said ultimately, "time we was turnin' in." He rose and stretched with the air of a man who has made his mark in the world and finds a certain satisfaction in absorbing the atmosphere of those things which mark his early struggles. Then he went to the table and loosed his money belt again.

"Gold ain't worth much up here, Jim," he said, "but I ain't quite ready tuh take Betty away just yet an' I'd like fer tuh pay yuh a good bit fer carin' fer her."

"Put it away, Tom Miles!" Jennie Mason snapped. "The gold we got from Betty more'n paid us! You oughta be ashamed!"

Miles turned away with a shrug and passed out into the night and down to the little camp, where he quickly rolled himself in his blankets. For a long time the family sat quiet, enthralled by the wonderful things they had heard and the knowledge that the valley was actually tenanted by others of their color. Finally Mason spoke:

"He's had luck, Jennie," he said slowly. "You oughta taken that gold. We mighta gone to the Fort an' brought back some cattle. The western side o' the valley might do fer grazin'."

"Take his gold?" She almost snarled the words. "Gold? It ain't worth no more than alkali!"

That brought silence. Soon Mason lumbered off to bed. Jimmie took Betty's hand and led her outside the door. For a long time Jennie Mason watched after them, a queer light in her eyes. Then she, too, went to bed, and once lay there watching the moon again as she often had done in the past.

Outside Jimmie clung to Betty's hand. They stood looking over the valley, still, calm, bright with the light of the moon. But he found his eyes straying always to the embers down near the river and the forms of the sleeping men. Something huge had come to him, he groped for means to give it expression. These men were, to him, creatures of another world, supermen who mixed in things that changed, altered to their efforts, progressed.

"Don't let him take you away, Betty," he said suddenly. "Don't ever do that, will you?"

There was wild fervor in his tone, his eyes gleamed as she never before had seen them. He fascinated her, somehow; the very force of him and his grip upon her fingers tightened until she could have cried out.

"I—I don't—want to go away, Jimmie," she said softly.

"Why?" he demanded, "why don't you want to go away?"

She did not answer. Her lips trembled a little and she nervously brushed her forehead with her free hand. He persisted:

"Betty—listen to me, Betty. You can't go away!" He emphasized the word "can't," then explained: "I won't let you! What your father told us to-night made me see things better, Betty. I ain't goin' to stay on this here farm always! I'm goin'

out where there's a chance to do some of those big things. An', listen again, Betty—I'm comin' back just like he did, an' you gotta be here then—you gotta be—I love you! We'll be married, then!"

She uttered a little exclamation. He saw in her eyes that he had put into words the very things which she had found struggling within her emotions. He caught her close, hugged her until it seemed that she was crushed breathless. She felt his kisses again and again and a wild exultation seemed to grip her.

He was talking a little wildly, excitement, ardent emotions filling his tones to trembling. He spoke of the outer world, of the manner in which he would work for success and the manner in which he could come back to her and take her out of the alkali valley to the world of which they had heard.

Behind them the horses stirred restlessly in the lean-to which they still used now and then in good weather rather than fording the stream and going to the stable.

"I'll stay, Jimmie," the girl managed to say presently, "I love you, too!" He caught her close, kissed her again. "But what will your pa say?" She demanded.

"What do I care? He can't make me a prisoner, Betty!" It was the first time she had ever heard defiance in his tone and she admired him for it, inexplicably. "I'll go—an' I'll come back! Come back fer you an' ma!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A BLOW FALLS.

BREAKFAST next morning was eaten while the first light of day danced in elflike fashion across the mountain tops to the west. It was a silent meal; Mason appeared immersed in his thoughts and the others casting frequent glances through the window in the direction of the little camp down by the river.

When he had finished, Jimmie went to the corner of the room, where hung the earth-stained outer trousers he wore when at work in the fields. He slipped them on over his boots, and looked toward his father. The man remained at the table rather than following his usual custom of starting at once for the fields.

Jennie Mason, her eyes softened, despite a worried look that tainted them, gazed fondly at Betty Miles. Jimmie, responding to that telepathic thing within him which seemed to vibrate in accord with his mother's emotion, knew that she had guessed their secret. Several times he was on the point of mentioning it, yet each time he desisted. It struck him that Betty herself could do that better than he.

Finally Mason rose and walked to the door. There he stopped, leaning against the logs and gazing silently toward the camp below.

"I thought I'd wait fer Tom Miles," Mason said slowly. "He ain't got no right to be hangin' round the valley fillin' our minds with nonsense!"

No one answered the words. Jimmie saw that his mother had silently set about removing and cleansing the dishes of the early meal. Betty aided her.

"You might be hookin' up, Jimmie," his father said presently. "We'll be workin' the east field an' use the same team as yestiddy. I'll be along right quick. If Miles don't come soon I'll go to him."

Silently Jimmie obeyed. He went to the lean-to and harnessed the horses. It seemed to him that every patch, every repair on the ancient leather shouted to him of hopelessness, of despair, of futility. And when he stepped into the open again the grass of the valley and the low-grown corn swayed in the wind so that they seemed to him to be mocking.

Miles had come and something prompted the lad to follow him into the house. Scarcely had the man said his good morning than Mason spoke that which was in his mind:

"Tom Miles," he said, "this valley is our'n. You ain't got no business here, an' you're makin' a lot o' trouble. We ain't the same breed o' dawg, Tom! What we love don't mean nothin' to you, an' I'm askin' that you pack up an' git out afore there's real hard feelin'. Your talk stirs up folks that don't have no right to be stirred up!"

Miles stood still a moment, his eyes wide

with astonishment. Then he smiled sardonically, shrugged and, without a single word, strode through the door and they gathered there and watched him reach and strike camp. He spoke to the others shortly and, in a surprisingly short time, the cavalcade filed out of the valley.

"Our life is here in this valley," Mason said to them all. "We started to build this an' we're doin' it. There ain't goin' to be time fer nonsense!" Then he turned to get his own clothes. Something in Betty's eyes impelled Jimmie to speak:

"Ma an' Betty liked to hear about what goes on outside, pa," he said. "Miles mighta helped kill the day fer them!"

Mason whirled at the words. His bearded face looked livid as he glowered at his son. Jennie Mason moved closer, it seemed as though the man was on the point of using physical violence. For the first time in his life Jimmie did not flinch. On the contrary. His shoulders squared and his bent arm seemed to flex.

"You'll be gettin' to work, Jimmie," the father said ominously. As he spoke he pointed through the door and his great hand shook with the force of his feeling.

"I'm willin' to work," Jimmie said, "it ain't that—"

"It's these damned fool tales o' that wanderin' liar!" Mason roared angrily. "Lies they are! He ain't man 'nuff tuh care fer his own kin! I know best!"

Once again Jimmie felt the presence of Betty. It seemed to him that he was being belittled before her eyes and he cared more for her thoughts of him than for anything else on earth. His eyes glinted resentment. Suddenly that which had been brewing within him all those years when he had gazed at the encircling hills, broke its bounds.

He knew that he hated the valley; knew that his mother and Betty hated the valley, and that his own father knew the valley was a failure and sought to remain only because he was too doggedly obstinate to confess it. He knew that this clash must come, that, to postpone it now was to make it only the more bitter when it did present for final disposition.

All these things he knew in one sweeping flush of realization. And, while they brought to him a sense of maturity, a definite sight of responsibility greater, even, than his father's, he could not find words to express them.

"I ain't goin' to the fields," he said finally, "I ain't goin'!" That was rebellion, it was direct disobedience, refusal to submit. Let his father make the most of it! Let the man see that he had bred a man as great as he thought himself to be!

For a long moment they stared at each other, the older man rendered speechless by the suddenness and the completeness of this open mutiny. Very slowly and trembling the hand he had raised to point settled toward his side.

"You'll go to the fields, Jimmie," he said, his voice hoarse and his eyes glowing red, "you'll go to the fields when I say or by Gawd, I'll shake you outen your boots! Now go!"

The room was so still as to be oppressive. None of them seemed even to breathe. Jennie Mason had moved closer still, her eyes wide and solemn, her hands trembling. She tried to speak, but failed to make her words clear, understandable; and her husband waved her aside heedlessly.

"I ain't goin' to the fields!" Jimmie cried angrily. "Don't swear at me! Shake all you please—if you can! I ain't never goin' back to the fields! Never again!"

Mason clenched his huge fist, took a quick step toward his son. Jimmie settled himself to meet attack, crying out:

"Don't touch me, pa! Don't touch me—I swear I'll hit you back! I will!"

Jennie Mason called some unintelligible words to them, reached for her husband's upraised arm as he went toward Jimmie. But they were past stopping.

Mason lunged, his clenched fist directed at Jimmie. The lad dodged, not seeing that his mother had leaped between them. The blow directed at the lad struck Jennie Mason's temple, and as it glanced off she staggered back. Jimmie saw her there, sagging on swaying knees, a stream of blood running down her cheek from the growing bruise on her temple.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Taming of Wolf Kivlin

By HOWARD E. MORGAN

"FIRE him? Heck no! He's one o' the best men we got. Tame him, thet's the answer, like I told you forty times. He ain't nothin' else but a big, overgrown, scrappy kid. A good lickin' is whut he needs. Thet 'll tame him."

Jinx Haden, the little mill boss at Sutton's Run, was altogether sure of himself, as usual. Also as usual, his opinion was the result of considerable deliberation and not to be lightly passed over. During the summer he had had ample time to review the havoc caused by Wolf Kivlin and he had come to the conclusion that what the two-fisted young man in question needed was a good beating. That was all.

Kivlin had never been licked. Easier said than done, however. Adequate means of "taming Wolf Kivlin" by the process intended, was not available at Sutton's Run, and Kivlin was due to report for work now any day.

Since the previous season, the law had come to Sutton's Run in the person of Deputy Sheriff Red Murphy, a pint-sized, auburn locked individual, whose strict adherence to the tenets of the law bade fair seriously to reduce the precious man power of Sutton's camp, unless something was done about—Wolf Kivlin.

Kivlin was at the bottom of everything. But no, not exactly that, either. He seldom started anything, still, by some uncanny means, he always managed to be in at the finish.

He was not bad, just a husky, roughneck kid, as Haden had said, withal, owning a quick temper and strength equivalent to that of several ordinary men—ordinary men as interpreted in terms of the average man power of an Oregon lumber camp.

All of this Jinx had made clear to Murphy. And Murphy had promised to help. This day, the little sheriff had something

up his sleeve. Haden had been sure of it the minute that red head had appeared in the doorway of the office.

"An' we'll do that same, mister. I'm wid ye, like I said, until it's proven that you're wrong. Law and order is phwat we're here for. You know this Kivlin. I don't. Howiver, it looks like he's the cause o' the bad repitation the camp's got. All he needs is a lickin', says you. An' he's got that same a comin' to him."

With which hopeful, if somewhat cryptic statement, Murphy hopped to his feet and hurried away. But he did not go far. Haden could hear his voice, just outside. And he grinned, in anticipation of—he didn't know what.

Despite a choice variety of wordy arguments, Haden and the little sheriff got along very well together. They had much in common. Both were little men; both lived by their wits in a world where brawn was king. Their mental processes were in many ways similar. Already they were good friends.

Haden was prepared for something out of the ordinary this day, hence he was not surprised, only somewhat chagrined at not having originated the idea himself, when Murphy returned, grinning, followed by a thick-shouldered, bull-necked individual with a battered countenance stamping him at once as a professional pugilist.

"Mr. Kid Ruhl of San Francisco, Jinx. Meet Mr. Haden, Kid."

Jinx Haden fumbled with the big man's hand. And Kid Ruhl surely was a big man. As big as Kivlin. And a professional fighter.

There should be nothing to it. The little lumber boss had in his day learned much about the business of fighting, and he knew that the most terrible rough-and-tumble fighters are almost invariably helpless in the hands of trained boxers. Many times had he seen this proved.

Wolf Kivlin was unskilled, certainly. He was due for a licking and Mr. Kid Ruhl was the man for the job.

Haden sighed happily. The end of his troubles was in sight.

"Does the big boy know what he's here fer?"

Red Murphy nodded, grinning.

Haden grinned, too.

"Don't be too rough with him, Kid. Wolf's got a good heart. He ain't a bad feller. An' we cain't afford t' hev him crippled. Jest take it easy like, on'y, let him know he's beat. Git me? No man-killin' stuff, jest a good, honest-t'-God lickin'. An' make it public!"

Wolf Kivlin appeared a few days later, bigger and more arrogant than ever. And as Jinx Haden measured the potential power in those mighty shoulders which all but spanned the wide doorway of the little office, he experienced certain vague misgivings.

Wolf Kivlin was no longer a kid. It seemed as though a new strength had come into the square-jawed face; and that massive, yellow-thatched head, the top of which brushed the door jam, seemed to set more firmly on the short, thick neck.

Since spring, Wolf Kivlin had become a man. Mr. Kid Ruhl would need all his skill.

Haden signed Kivlin on without the usual admonitions, however. This for two reasons—first, the disciplining of Wolf Kivlin was already a settled thing, and second, he was exceedingly occupied with another matter.

This other matter concerned a small time circus and vaudeville show, which had run the risk of being bottled up in the hills by the snows, now long overdue, in order to collect a few dollars from the amusement-hungry populace of Sutton's Run. Haden was not altogether in sympathy with this venture, but popular opinion had taken the thing out of his hands and he was now devoting his energetic efforts to making the show a success.

And a success it bade fair to be. The entire personnel of two rival camps drifted hilariously into Sutton's Run on the day of the show.

And it was on this day, when the mud-rutted streets of the little lumber town were alive with men, that Red Murphy decided to climax the taming of Wolf Kivlin. Kid Ruhl received his final instructions in the office of the Sutton Lumber Company, delivered jointly by those two self-satisfied

conspirators, Sheriff Red Murphy, and Jinx Haden.

The fighter was to pick a quarrel with Kivlin on the street near the mill office if possible, so that the two conspirators might inconspicuously witness the performance.

The Kid obeyed instructions to the letter. Unfortunately, as it turned out, for all concerned. But the Kid's equipment from the neck up had not been considered when his fistic services were purchased.

No one had expected that he would be called upon—to think. Anyhow, who was he to forecast the relative reactions of a man who, for the first time, faces his world with the woman of his choice.

The Kid saw Kivlin and a girl coming along the street. His instructions were to pick a fight, publicly. He knew that one of the surest ways to a scrap, is to insult a man's woman, wife, sweetheart, sister—it matters not which.

He fronted Kivlin and Mary Carr. Chucked the girl under the chin and called her sweetie. Then, the muddy roadway came up and hit him.

Kid Ruhl, the 'Frisco Terror, had stood on the receiving end of some mighty wallops in his day; but never before had he been knocked down by a man's fist landing squarely atop his thick head. The sensation was a new one, quite.

He wasn't out; but he was thoroughly bewildered. He sat in the mud and watched the circle of dark faces go 'round and 'round. Then he was jerked to his feet.

An open palm struck him in the face with force sufficient to have felled an ordinary man. The smashing blow merely served to clear the Kid's head, however.

The dark faces paused in their endless circlings. He shook the black hair out of his eyes and sparred up to Kivlin.

He struck out, right and left, in the general direction of a pair of angry blue eyes belonging to Wolf Kivlin. Both blows landed, but neither so much as rocked the shaggy yellow head.

And, even as the Kid skillfully parried a wide swinging wallop, he began to worry. There had been force behind those two blows of his. Both had landed fairly. Was this tow-headed kid made of rock?

He tried again. Again and still again. Well-placed, bone-crushing, murderous blows.

But the Kid's big fists had little effect on that steel-muscled body. No more than one in ten of Kivlin's unskilled wallops landed at first. He swung a dozen times for Ruhl's once.

And the Kid, despite the fact that he was finding it hard to hurt his opponent, regained some of his confidence. Kivlin would soon tire. All that was necessary was to wait.

But Wolf Kivlin did not tire. He followed the Kid relentlessly around and around the close packed circle. His random blows landed more and more often.

Ruhl, breathing hard, watched his opponent closely, for that slight letting down which his experience had taught him invariably followed a pummeling such as Wolf Kivlin's big body had been subjected to. But Kivlin did not weaken. Instead, his strength seemed to grow in direct proportion as his rage increased.

"Stand still an' fight," he roared.

And the Kid, foolishly, stood still. For a matter of perhaps two minutes, he swapped punches with Wolf Kivlin, toe to toe. Then—

Jinx Haden, nose flattened against the dirty window pane in the mill office, groaned dismally.

"The big ham," he muttered. "He's cooked now. Wolf's mad fer sure. Doggone, jest ain't he mad though. An' all becuz Ruhl picked on the girl. The Kid didn't know any better, tain't likely, an' we didn't know enough t' warn him. Heck, I never seen Wolf with no woman before. Allus been a reg'lar woman hater, he has. Yah—there he goes!"

One of Kivlin's full arm wallops had at last connected solidly with the Kid's jaw. There came a roar of approval from the crowd. The 'Frisco Terror lay flat on his back, blinking up at the gray sky.

A stentorian voice started counting: one, two, three—the Kid groped to his knees. Kivlin was no respecter of Marquis of Queensberry rules. Least of all when he was mad.

He started toward the fallen man,

mighty fists clenched for the finishing blow. A slim form pushed through the crowd and confronted him.

It was the girl. Haden recognized her now. Mary Carr. Jem Carr's daughter.

Last time he had seen her she was a gangling tomboy, all freckles and legs. Now, she was a woman. Very small. Pretty.

At present her face was white. She stood directly in Wolf Kivlin's path. He sought to push her aside. She resisted; stamped her foot. Her voice shrilled clearly through the sudden quiet.

"You stop it, George Kivlin! Right now. Don't you touch him!"

Some one laughed. Another mocked her falsetto voice: "Now you stop, George. Naughty, naughty—"

A roar of laughter followed this sally.

Wolf Kivlin's thin lips set purposefully. He lifted the girl, gently, but firmly, from his path. Reached the groggy Kid in a single stride.

But the short respite had served to clear Ruhl's head. He ducked Kivlin's swinging blow and scurried away, urged ungently by sundry slaps and kicks.

Dismayed by his opponent's flight, Kivlin tore frantically through the crowd, roaring like an angry bull when friendly hands sought to halt him.

Convinced at last that the Kid had made good his getaway, Kivlin turned his efforts to search for the girl, evidently with the intention of making his peace with her. Here, also, he was unsuccessful.

She was gone. And, finally, still in a white hot rage, he surged away through the milling people, thrusting them roughly from his path like a mate-hunting moose bull crashing through an alder thicket.

Jinx Haden swore, softly but earnestly. Sundry appropriate comments destined for the enlightenment of one Red Murphy, occurred to him; but the little sheriff, who had been at Haden's side throughout the Ruhl-Kivlin fiasco, had disappeared.

Haden stored up his spleen for future use and took up the sulphurous condemnation of all mankind, himself included, where he had left off.

He was still cursing intermittently, an hour later, when the outer door swung stealthily inward and Deputy Sheriff Red Murphy slipped inconspicuously into a chair.

"Wal—"

"Ne' mind. I know what you're goin' t' say. Save your breath. We gotta work t'gether fer a spell longer."

The little sheriff was visibly disturbed. He couldn't sit still. Twice he got up and peered out into the night. Haden swallowed hard on his angry impatience.

"Whut's the matter?"

"Hell's a poppin', thet's whut. An' it's goin' to bust right in here 'most any minute."

"How? Whut?"

"Kivlin's been on a rampage. Seems like this here gal went an' left him becuz he didn't mind her when she told him t' lay off fightin'. An' he's busted things wide open. Half a dozen rows a'ready. Nobody hurt much. On'y, he walloped a ol' codger named Hutchinson—"

"Hutchinson? Ol'Hutch! Hell's bells—"

"Yeah. I seen I couldn't do nothin' t' Kivlin without usin' a gun. I knew you wouldn't like that. But this feller, Hutchinson, got a poke in the eye an' he's comin' here t' swear out a warrant fer Kivlin's arrest. They tell me you know Hutchinson. P'raps you—"

"Know him? Jiminetty! Know him? He's the boss. Owner o' the Oregonian Lumber Company, thet's who he is. An' Wolf poked ol' Hutch in the eye. Sonovagun! Me do somethin'? With ol' Hutch? Nary a chanst, Red. Wolf's goose is cooked. Mine, too. An' yourn. The ol' man's decent enough, except on'y when he's haired up—"

Haden's voice died away into an apologetic gurgle as the heavy door again swung inward, admitting a short, thick-set man with an amazingly red face and keen, staring blue eyes. Just now the effect of those steely blue eyes was diminished to the point of ludicrousness, due to the fact that one of them peered redly from out a blue-black socket.

The newcomer's hat was missing, his immaculate clothes were mussed and dirty. Shreds of sawdust still showed in his rumpled gray hair.

He merely glared at Haden. Turned fiercely to Red Murphy. His good eye fastened on the silver star reposing conspicuously over Murphy's swift beating heart.

"So you're the sheriff?"

"Yessir. What kin I do fer you?"

This was a foolish thing to say. The little sheriff reddened like an embarrassed schoolboy and fidgeted uneasily in anticipation of the coming storm.

"Do for me? Do for me? Why, you—you—red-headed little runt! You—what are you here for? You saw—you saw him hit me. You were there. Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you arrest him? What good are you? And Haden here has been telling me what a fearless, conscientious limb of the law you are. That law and order was assured at Sutton's Run under you. Law and order—hell! A fine sheriff you are!"

The embarrassed flush left Red Murphy's face. He came to his feet, his lips stuttering with an angry retort. Haden found voice first, however. He clawed at Hutchinson's sleeve.

"Now, now, Mr. Hutchinson, jest a minute. Let me explain—"

"Explain nothing. You shut up, Haden. I want that man Kivlin arrested—pronto, understand? And if you haven't the guts to do it—I—I—I'll do it."

"But, Mr. Hutchinson, Wolf he's one o' the best men we got. We cain't afford t' lose him. He ain't a bad feller. On'y a kid, he is. All he needs—is tamin'."

"Taming? I'll tame him. A session behind steel bars 'll tame him. That warrant, sheriff—have it ready first thing in the morning! Kivlin is gone now, back to his cabin. Defies you to come and get him. He swears he'll never be jailed. Needs tamin', eh? I'll see that he's tamed. I'm going with you—in the morning."

For long after the irate old lumberman had gone Jinx Haden and Red Murphy sat silently on opposite sides of the big pine table, each occupied with his own troubled thoughts.

Finally Jinx Haden cleared his throat.

"Wal, looks like you got a job on yore hands, Red," he remarked pleasantly.

"Me? Hey, listen here, ye little wart, do ye think ye're easin' outa this mess now? Not fer a minute. You got me in it by beggin' me not t' hurt him. 'On'y a boy,' says you. 'Tamin's all he needs.' An' I played the game wid ye, didn't I? I lose, an' ye try t' squeal out of it. All right—t' hell wid ye. I'll handle this me own way from now on. Will I git Wolf Kivlin? Ye're danged tootin' I'll git him. I'll crease his thick skull wit' a ounce o' lead. That's how I'll git him."

"No, no—not that, yet, Red! I was on'y jokin'. No shootin'. We gotta git him, somehow, without no shootin'."

The little sheriff snorted disgustedly, but he was somewhat placated by the alarm which he saw in Jinx Haden's face. "An' ye're still full o' jokes, I'm thinkin. How—"

"Wal—he ain't on'y human, Red. Mebbe he *kin* lick one man. Mebbe he kin lick three 'r four. But they's a limit somewhar. Say a dozen—now he couldn't lick a dozen, could he?"

"'Tis not likely, but—"

"No buts, Red. I'll round up tweive good men and true. You kin swear 'em in as deputies, ef you want to. We'll go git Wolf Kivlin in the mornin'. He won't run away. I know. We'll arrest him. Bring him in. He may be bruised some'at. But even a dozen men won't be able t' hurt him bad, an' mebbe a few days in jail *will* tame him."

Sheriff Murphy's freckled face registered doubt. "'Tis but foolish play actin', Jinx. When it gets out that Red Murphy needed twelve men to arrest one man fer disturbin' the peace—"

"But it won't leak out, Red. We'll swear all the boys t' secrecy. We gotta arrest Wolf. An' we cain't afford t' hurt him bad. We jest gotta do this. It ain't as if—"

Finally the little sheriff reluctantly consented.

II.

And so it was that, early next morning, a small army of men slipped silently away from the slumbering little town of Sutton's Run. Each one, with the possible exception of Rudolph J. Hutchinson, wore a curiously

solemn expression, such as is usually attributed to soldiers going forth to battle.

Individually and collectively they had been coached by Jinx Haden regarding the part they were to play. Without doubt Wolf Kivlin would be found in his cabin. He would be waiting for them. He would fight.

They were to surround the cabin. Haden would call Kivlin forth. They were to do the rest.

It sounded simple. Trouble was, they all knew Wolf Kivlin. Knew him too well for their own peace of mind. At least half of the twelve would emerge from the encounter in various states of painful physical disrepair.

They were all Kivlin's friends. And yet they dared not shirk. Haden would never forget it, if they failed—would make their lives miserable during the coming winter. And if they performed too earnestly they would make an enemy of Wolf Kivlin. In other words, they stood to lose whichever way the logs ran.

Of them all, old Hutch found something in the clear, crisp November morning besides gloom. A lover of nature was old Hutch. Following a good night's sleep, much of his anger had left him anyhow. And by the time Wolf Kivlin's little cabin appeared on a distant ridge top, outlined redly in the glare of early sun, a sense of physical well-being, engendered by the blood-tingling tramp through the spruce thickets, had pretty much banished the little resentment that was left.

He wouldn't back down—certainly not. He had sworn out a warrant for Wolf Kivlin's arrest; and he would see the thing through.

Only, his personal interest in the culmination of the affair was gone. He had no desire to witness the terrible fight which he knew would be staged up there on that sunlit ridge top. And so, when the men, under Murphy's direction, deployed, circling the little cabin, old Hutch turned away into the sweet-smelling thicket, leaving the battle to rage as it would.

He started away at right angles to the cabin, treading softly the velvety carpet of pine needles. Apparently they hadn't missed him. He didn't want to be missed. From time to time he paused, listening for the sound of strife. A bluejay called raucously from a tree top; a red squirrel chattered on a flat rock; there were no other sounds. Perhaps Kivlin *had* run away, at that.

At last he rested on a fallen log and lit his pipe. Between puffs queer sounds came to him, sounds that were not of the forest. Hushed voices. Laughter, half repressed. Slow footsteps approached through the frosty green thicket. Two figures, a man and a woman, walking hand in hand. Wolf Kivlin and Mary Carr.

Before old Hutch had a chance to move they saw him. Discovered, he came to his feet—advanced slowly.

"So—"

Immediately he realized that the inflection he had placed on that single word made it sound unnecessarily harsh. The result might not be altogether pleasant.

Recognition spread over Wolf Kivlin's heavy face; the girl knew him too. Her left arm was now linked with Kivlin's, and on the third finger of her left hand old Hutch discerned a narrow band of gold. Married. Evidently they were, even now, just returning from the settlement at Thunder River and the priest.

The old lumberman swallowed hard in response to something he saw in young Kivlin's scowling face. He backed tentatively away as Kivlin started toward him. The girl clung to her husband's arm. He pulled her along with him for several feet, then stopped in response to the persistent tug of her slim fingers. She whispered fiercely while he stooped to listen.

Old Hutch could not hear what the girl said, but he heard Wolf Kivlin's reply.

"He's the ol' cuss whut swore out the warrant. He sicked thet Kid feller onto me. I don't care ef he's the President of the United States—he's t' blame fer—everything—an' I'm goin' t' sock him one. I'm goin' t' bust him—wide open."

"No, no, no." More whispering. Kivlin listened, indecision manifest on his red face. Finally he shrugged resignedly. The girl, smiling, turned to old Hutch.

"He won't—do anything—Mr. Hutch-

inson. He won't fight any more. He has promised."

Following this positive announcement some of old Hutch's dwindling importance returned. He breathed relievedly and fixed his sharp blue eyes on Wolf Kivlin's lowering face.

"So you've promised the little woman you won't fight any more, eh?"

"'S'right." Wolf Kivlin's big hands were still clenched. He was still scowling darkly.

"H-mm—well, the sheriff's waiting for you down there. Come along."

The girl gasped audibly. Wolf Kivlin swore. But they both followed old Hutch as he led the way down the rock-littered slope.

A dozen pairs of wondering eyes watched them draw near the little cabin. One by one the twelve tried men and true came forward. They circled slowly, cautiously, ominously about—Wolf Kivlin.

"Here he is, sheriff. Told you *I'd* get him."

Old Hutch locked thumbs in belt and swelled out his chest importantly. His keen eyes were fixed on Mrs. Wolf Kivlin. Her eyes in turn never left her newly acquired husband's twitching face. Her fingers clutched whitely at his arm. Wolf Kivlin's lips were tight set, his mighty body rigid. He leaned forward, legs wide apart, ready—

"George—" she reproved, soft-voiced. She touched his clenched fist with her hand.

The fist opened, and closed on her slim fingers; then the tenseness left Wolf Kivlin suddenly. He moistened his lips—grinned down at Red Murphy—and—held out his hands, wrists together, toward that officer of the law.

"I'll go peaceable," he said.

A single tear rolled slowly down Mary Kivlin's cheek.

The little sheriff fumbled with a pair of glistening handcuffs.

And then old Hutch cleared his throat ostentatiously. His bright eyes were twinkling. "Put 'em away, sheriff. And tear up that warrant. I've changed my mind. Something seems to tell me Wolf Kivlin won't cause you any more trouble. He—he's—tamed. Yessir, Wolf Kivlin's—tamed!"

THE END

THE WINNER

I'VE got a black eye and a nose
That's broke in three places or more!
They's patches of skin off my shin till it shows
The bone, an', oh, golly, it's sore!

My lef' toes' swoll up in my boot,
My hands only mittens could fit;
They's hints o' the prints of a horn yuh don't toot
Somewhere jest about where I sit.

No, brother, it wasn't no wreck,
Nor bronc ridin' that I been in:
I just done my best in a contest, by heck,
A-milkin' wild cows—and I win!

S. Omar Barker.

Those Lima Eyes

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "A Wild Pursuit," "The Black Past," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV *(Continued).*

IN WRONG WITH NELLIE.

JUST a merry little quip at the breakfast table, and my hopes of bliss were torpedoed! Although I felt dizzy, I had to keep my face straight and assure Montez that he flattered me—that the lady and myself were platonic friends, nothing more, which of course he didn't take the trouble to pretend to believe.

Not only was my own ship of joy sunk without a trace, but in all probability Rupert's was sinking fast; for Nellie would tell Dolores that we were both a couple of gay deceivers, and the thing to do would be set the dog on us when we came around Thursday night with our arms stretched out to them. Montez, without being aware of it, had won a double-header.

Now, there was never a more innocent person in the world than myself, nor any one who appeared more guilty. It is true I had rested my eyes on the widow the first night I saw her in the dining room, and I had been fool enough to follow the instructions in her letter; but at that time I did not know that Nellie was in the land of the living; I was heart whole, fancy free, and bored stiff.

Then I met the wonderful girl at the races, and of course failed to keep my appointment at the Café of the Two Ambassadors. Of course I was afraid of the conspirators, but I probably wouldn't have shown up anyway after seeing Nellie.

Since then I hadn't given a thought to the señora, and only mentioned her name in Ebbro's house because I was in a tight place and thought I needed some excuse for going to the Two Ambassadors.

But the bull fighter had arrived, and practically admitted she was in love with me, and carried me away with her. Should I have refused to go when there was a chance they would scrag me if I didn't take the chance she gave me to escape?

The trouble was that she showed she was

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crazy about me, and nothing could convince that particular bunch of Spaniards that a man would refuse to accept the favors of any good-looking woman who offered them. It was an appalling situation; it made me quite sick. But while I was having this horrible time Montez had turned to Rupert and changed the subject.

"My interest in you, Señor Grew," he said, "was entirely due to my desire to be courteous to a distinguished American who was commended to me by a friend in New York; but since you did me the honor to call upon me last night, and unfortunately missed the house, with the intention of asking me to act for you in your mission to our city, I wish to assure you that I am entirely at your service.

"The plan which you have in mind, of which you gave an inkling to the press, is one that is very near my heart, and I would assist you quite without self-interest for the sake of my beloved city."

"Hear, hear," I said silently and satirically.

"Now, it happens that the sudden death of our lamented president has placed me in a position to be of great service, because the new president is my closest friend, a man of great ability and vision, and already interested in your project."

"Really, señor," protested Rupert, "I am not sure that I wish to embark in the scheme. Certain events—"

"Pardon, Mr. Grew. Let us not discuss it now. Naturally you are somewhat ruffled at the unfortunate experiences of last night. However, we must not allow personal feeling to affect our interests, and I promise you that I shall lay before you a plan which will delight you.

"To-day the president is occupied entirely with arrangements for the funeral of his late excellency, but to-morrow I will have a conference with him, and on Wednesday I will invite you to lunch and lay our plan before you.

"Later in the day I shall arrange an interview with the president himself. Now I have the honor to wish you gentlemen good morning."

The old boy bowed himself out before Rupert could say another word. Personally, I was in no condition to make any remarks, for I was so deep in despondency that I would commit suicide if I could think of a painless method.

"That gives us two days, lads," said MacQuaid. "It means that they have abandoned any plots they might have formed against us; have decided to let bygones be bygones because they have got what they were after, and expect to use us to their advantage."

"We're in a deuce of a fix," complained Rupert. "It's all because you flirted with that female butcher, Hilton."

"If it hadn't been for her, look where I would have been, and you two fellows also. Was there anything less likely in the world that that Montez should talk about me to the girls? And this morning, too, when they had the death of old Barco to chew on with their breakfast!"

"Of course you're finished with Nellie," said Job's comforter, Rupert. "But it's Dolores, and the effect on her, that I'm considering."

"Always thinking of yourself. Don't you see that my heart is broken."

"Bah, you can console yourself with the matador!"

"Another word out of you, and I'll floor you!" I threatened, advancing with fire in my eye.

"Boys, laddies, be sensible," implored MacQuaid. "Ye can't afford to quarrel. Maybe the girls will think he is traducing ye—that he is suspicious they are fond of ye. Perhaps they didn't believe him."

I could have hugged the old padre for his consolation, and Rupert stuck out his hand and was man enough to apologize.

Although a battle had been averted and a reconciliation arranged, we were as much in the dark as before regarding the present attitude of the two girls toward ourselves. Despite the hopeful suggestion of the lecturer, we had no means of knowing what would be the outcome of the chance remark of a parent and guardian who was entirely unaware that he had let go of a bombshell.

Given certain information regarding him, you can foretell fairly accurately how a sane, intelligent man will react to a certain

set of circumstances; yet, however well you may be acquainted, a woman will make a false prophet out of you, no matter what prediction you make.

As a great man once said: "The female brain is formed exactly like the male's, and she may reason with it just as logically and effectively; but you cannot depend upon her to do so, especially if her emotions are affected."

I have known a faithful married man to lose his home because the yellow Angora cat of a neighbor crawled up on him and left a long hair on his shoulder, although his wife was a college graduate and an author of a book on psychology.

On the other hand, a friend of mine, when seen lunching with a beautiful actress by the lady who bore his name and who was notorious for her jealous disposition, told her that the actress was consulting him about the disposal of some stocks; and she swallowed the story without a murmur. You can't dope them out.

And if you can't use a form book on our highly educated and man-minded females in the U. S. A., try to guess what a primitive, temperamental, high-geared, fiery and exquisitely feminine little Spaniard would do when she heard her lover had been playing around with a notorious woman like the señora.

The night before we had arranged to meet the girls Thursday and carry them off; had agreed not to see them until then, lest our secret meetings be discovered, which meant that there was no way for me to make an explanation if one happened to be needed—and, despite the kind words of MacQuaid, I had a hunch that I would need the most plausible story of a career that has been devoted to imaginative literature, as you know.

While MacQuaid got out his ever-ready notebook to jot down the events of the preceding night as affecting himself, and Rupert sat scowling at the blotter on his desk, I lay down on the sofa and began to think up an explanation that would be satisfactory to Nellie Murphy.

While I never tell a lie if the facts will serve, I am not so devoted to the truth that I can't deviate from it in a good cause, and for the sake of my happiness and Nellie's—because if I got her I would be the most devoted husband since the days when Socrates let Xantippe wipe her beautiful muddy feet on him—I would lie like the propaganda department of a nation at war.

It seemed to me that it would be fatal to admit that I even knew Señora Escamona, or that I had ever set eyes on her, because an admission of a bowing acquaintance would be fatal in view of what Montez had related.

It is much better to say, "Why, I never heard of the person; who is she?" than to reply that "I knew her slightly"; for the answer to that is, "How well do you know her?" and "Are you sure you never held hands with her, or kissed her, or had dinner with her?" and all that sort of stuff. A blunt, straightforward denial of acquaintance is best in such cases, because the lady cannot ask any more questions without allowing you to think she believes you are lying.

As I lay there I made up my speech, which went like this:

"Why, Nellie darling, surely you don't think I would look at another woman when I am in love with you, and as for this bull-fighting person whom you mention, I never even heard of her; I didn't know she was a bull fighter—I didn't know she ever left Spain, or was ever born, in fact.

"This is an outrageous prevarication invented by your uncle because I foolishly told him that I thought you were very beautiful. I hate to say anything against your uncle, but haven't you caught him in lies before—don't you feel sure that he tells fibs to your aunt to explain where he goes nights?

"I wouldn't be surprised if he was the friend of this Señora What's-her-name, and he tried to make you think I was the person to draw suspicion from himself."

"What the deuce are you muttering over there?" demanded Rupert; and I snapped out of it. However, if I could get Nellie alone for five minutes I was sure I could restore the former perfect confidence between us; only all the regular methods of talking to a girl were out.

Telephone? Not a chance. Write a letter? Probably her aunt opened all her letters. Call at the house? I would be ejected by six servants or more. Really as a place to carry on a love affair Peru is absolutely impossible; I can't recommend it at all.

"You better run down to Callao and snoop around," Rupert suggested. "It may take a couple of days to line up a craft to carry us to sea."

"It seems to me much more important to reach the girls and make sure they are not going back out on us. There is no sense in having a boat ready if they refuse to come."

"You forget you have to carry off Mrs. Natchez," he retorted. "You let us in for that, too. Suppose Dolores thinks she's a sweetheart of mine?"

"Rupert, you get my goat. If it wasn't for Violet we wouldn't have the Caspian to pick us up. Anyway, we'll take along MacQuaid to squire the synthetic blonde, because, if we leave him behind us, they will murder him as sure as fate."

"I'm not ready to leave Peru," the lecturer protested. "I haven't got half my material for my lecture, and only a few pictures; and I don't think I ought to be in company with another man's wife, particularly if she is an actress and a blonde."

"Mac, you're in too deep to back out," I assured him. "When Montez discovers that we have gone off with the girls he'll flay you alive. He owns the new government, and don't you forget it."

"If you promise to make it plain that I have nothing to do with the presence of this woman, I suppose I'll have to accompany you," he admitted. "But it's a mad enterprise."

Half an hour later I boarded the electric train for Callao, although it seemed to me to be very doubtful whether we would use the boat if I discovered one. I had authority from Rupert to promise to pay what was necessary to secure a seaworthy craft, and an admonition to operate with great caution and secrecy.

It sounds absurd, when I set it down in black and white, that a stranger in the country, unfamiliar with the language, with the port regulations, and the port itself, should have the impudence to attempt to engage a native ship captain to violate the laws of his own land, and as I settled back in my wooden seat in the train I had no notion in the world how to go about it.

From Lima to Callao is only seven or eight miles over a flat, sunburned, rather disreputable-looking countryside, peopled mostly by goats, and lazy Indians who live in tumbledown shacks, partly concealed by screaming billboards in Spanish advertising American staples.

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. SCHWAB OF ST. LOUIS.

As the train started, two men met in the aisle near my seat, one of whom was obviously an Englishman and a person of some consequence, for he wore a polo costume of white shirt, short coat, white linen knickers and patent-leather top-boots; his face was florid and perspiring, and he held his nose pointed upward, and sported a monocle. On top of his head was a white tropical helmet.

The second man was a nondescript individual dressed in a rather messy white drill and a well-worn straw hat. They bumped; the Britisher drew back indignantly, the other grinned good-naturedly and said: "Excuse me." Then he dropped into the vacant seat beside me.

"Really, my man," said the Englishman, "you should look where you are going."

The other gave him an impudent stare, the Britisher recovered himself and stalked stiffly down the car.

"Four-flusher," mumbled the man beside me.

I laughed. "You're an American, of course."

"Oh, sure," he admitted. "That was one of the lords of creation."

"It was as much his fault as yours."

"Oh, sure. Only he hadn't been introduced to me, so I couldn't be there. Get it?"

"I do."

"Been out here long?"

"Only a few weeks."

"Run into many of those?"

"First I've seen."

"The place is full of them," he sighed. "Give me a Peruvian every time."

"Blood is thicker than water," I reminded him.

"Oh, the English are all right; I've lived among them, and I work for an English firm now in Callao. It's just those fellows; I can't stand them."

"What's wrong with them besides a little stiffness?"

The stranger drew out a cigar, offered one to me, which I declined.

"It's like this," he explained. "In England they have a pretty powerful caste system; it's breaking up a little, but not much. A gentleman is a fine fellow, well educated, broad-minded, the salt of the earth. He is a sport, plays all kinds of games, cuts a dash, works a little, not much, dresses to kill, but he's all right.

"The clerk class in London thinks the world of the gentleman; of course he won't associate with them, but they imitate him. Every now and then they have to send some clerk off to a foreign country to represent the firm, because the upper classes are having too good a time at home, and won't go.

"They take a cockney, double his salary, and send him to Lima or the Argentine to boss a lot of native help. On the boat coming out he turns himself into a gentleman.

"He never played polo or rode a horse in his life; he's usually badly educated, and has to think to put on his 'aitches' in the right place and leave them off where he is accustomed to put them on. At home he would be snubbed if he tried to swank, but nobody knows him here. Get me?"

"I begin to."

"Well, he discovers he can live cheaply, and better than at home, and he finds a regular society established of people just like himself.

"Right here in this town are a few hundrew lower-class Englishmen doing exactly what the nobility do back in the old country. All of them pretend to be younger sons of good families; they four-flush to one another—talk about their relatives, the Earl of This or the Baron of That.

"They buy polo ponies—horses are cheap out here—and they dress for dinner, and have the time of their lives; and when one of them has to go home it almost kills him. I don't mind their innocent play, but they get so haughty, they lord it over anybody unfortunate enough to have to work for them, try to come the superior caste stuff on a fellow like me.

"That big stiff who insulted me knows who I am, but he is the manager of some piddling English firm in Callao, and I'm just a clerk. So he tries to treat me as he thinks a gentleman should treat an underling.

"When a regular toff happens to visit us from England, that fellow and his gang lap the polish off his shoes, and he expects me to do the same for him; but I don't like the taste of shoe polish."

I didn't know whether this American was being fair to the expatriated Britishers or not; evidently he had a grievance; but he was likable and amusing, and I needed distraction.

"Why do you stand for it?" I asked him.

"Landed on the beach, broke; trying to get a stake and get back to God's country. Like liquor, and can't save any money. What's your hard-luck story?"

"I came here with a theatrical troupe, and the natives married all the chorus girls," I said with a grin.

"Shake, kid."

We shook, and then the train pulled into the station at Callao.

"I suppose you talk the language?" I conjectured.

"Oh, sure. I had to pick it up; otherwise I couldn't get a job."

"Come to lunch with me," I suggested.

It seemed to me that luck favored me, for I needed an agent who spoke Spanish and who could be trusted. This man filled half the bill; whether he could be relied upon I didn't know yet, but I hoped to find out.

We had a pleasant lunch, opened a bottle of wine, and became confidential. He told me he hailed from St. Louis, had drifted to New Orleans, been purser on a fruit liner for a time, worked in Panama as a

clerk in a hotel, finally got into trouble about a girl, and had to go south.

He had been in Peru two years, didn't like it, but the tropics were in his blood; most likely, if he did manage to go home, he would wander back again.

From our table, we could look over the port, and observed a Peruvian torpedo boat destroyer lying at anchor. Callao is not properly a harbor, more of a roadstead, but as storms are rare, it serves well enough.

Big steamers did not dock in those days—perhaps they do now—but lay off half a mile from land, and lightered their cargo, sending their passengers ashore in a tender.

I saw plenty of sailing vessels at anchor, and in that quarter of the world there were still a goodly number of full-rigged ships, the most beautiful craft that ever sailed on the oceans.

It would be a simple matter to get out of the port at night, as there was no narrow, guarded harbor entrance; all that would be necessary was willingness upon the part of some small vessel to take a chance.

The town was sun-baked, much hotter than Lima, although it was on the ocean-side. The buildings were brown and monotonous; the only rest for the eye was a little park near the water where a few dozen undernourished palms spread some slight shade.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In a rotten little hotel at the back of the town. I never go home until the cafés are shut."

His name, he had informed me, was Henry Schwab, a good St. Louis name, and I felt pretty sure he was my man.

"Want to make some real money?" I asked suddenly.

He gazed at me suspiciously. "Somebody has already killed the president," he retorted.

"Nothing like that. I would do what has to be done myself, only I can't talk the language, and don't know this town."

"You want me to break the law, of course; otherwise there would be nothing to pay."

"How do you feel about the law down here?"

He laughed, lifted his glass, drained it, and set it down.

"They have a very fine jail in Lima, modern, all the latest wrinkles to keep a man snug, but they set a poor table. Suppose you open up; if I don't like your proposition, I'll turn it down, but keep my mouth shut."

I hesitated, then decided to trust him; the whole thing was a long shot, and he wouldn't raise the odds much more.

"I am planning to elope with a Peruvian girl, and my friend, another American, is running away the same night with her cousin. We thought we could hire some vessel, and put to sea."

Mr. Schwab regarded me with sadness, mingled with scorn.

"If you want to commit suicide it's your affair, but why murder some innocent girls. Don't you know that there isn't any place to go when you get outside the port except China and the South Sea islands? And if these girls come of good families they will trace you, send that destroyer after you, clap you in jail, and if the fathers are influential enough, get you murdered.

"No, amigo. I could use some money very nicely, but I'd have it on my conscience to take it from a lovesick lunatic. Count me out."

Laughing, I shook hands with him. "I see I shall have to tell you the whole plot. It's not as crazy as it sounds, but it is bad enough. All I want is to run north forty or fifty miles and lay to, because I expect a big steamer to pick us up. If you can help me, suppose you come along, and my friend and myself will pay your passage back to New York."

"Nothing going north this week but the mailboat Caspian," he said curtly. "She wouldn't pick you up; chances are she would pass you so far off that she wouldn't see your signals, and her captain wouldn't stop anyway."

"I am expecting to arrange to have him on the lookout for us; if he doesn't agree to do the job we don't set sail."

He wrinkled his tanned forehead.

"All this arranging you are going to do will cost a lot of money," he hazarded. "Have you got it?"

"My friend is rich. Perhaps you have read about him in the paper. His name is Rupert Grew."

"Oh," he chuckled. "That nut. Yes, I read about his winter resort scheme, and I laughed myself sick. I assumed he was a confidence man from the States, and the police would be after him on the next boat. You know they have extradition here."

"Rupert is worth a million," I told him, laying it on thick. "He knows what he is about, and don't you forget it."

"If he is on the level, why is he planning to make a get-away under the cover of darkness? You seem to be a nice fellow, but your story, I don't mind telling you, is fishy."

"I see you have principles," I laughed. "I'll make a clean breast of everything." Then I told him the whole yarn including Rupert's pursuit of Dolores, and my bright publicity scheme to advertise him so that the girl would learn that he was in Lima.

"There will be hell to pay," he mused. "The natives have fallen hard for this winter-resort scheme. Naturally, they think they have the finest country on earth, and it sounds plausible enough to them that Americans should come here to avoid the ice and snow.

"They can't get it through their heads that most of us like snow. I'd love to see a six-foot snowdrift this minute. They have been talking about it in my office, and I understand that prices are up on every foot of vacant land within ten miles of the city.

"The boss said this morning that they were buying and selling land like mad in Lima. In a week there will be a real boom, the disappearance of Grew would puncture it, and a mob of indignant land purchasers will be yelling for his blood."

"All the more necessity for a quick get-away."

"How much will you pay me to get you a vessel?"

"What do you want?"

"A hundred dollars. It sounds like a holdup, but I'll save you most of it on the price of the boat."

"It's a deal. Here's twenty to bind the bargain."

"They keep a very slack watch at night," he said. "Most of these fishing smacks go in and out when they like, but let the skipper think you want him to do something illegal, and he will charge all the traffic will bear. And when he sees Peruvian women and American men going off together, he will know that something is up; and if he doesn't back out he'll try to get your last cent."

"One of these women is American," I said. "The others speak English perfectly. They could pass themselves off as Americans."

He slapped his hand on the table. "That's the idea. Why make it look like a runaway at all? Why violate the port regulations?

"Suppose I go down and engage a little schooner to take a party of Americans fishing. Start at five in the morning, and sail out at sunrise; that's perfectly legitimate.

"The Caspian won't leave port until noon, and by that time you can be fifty miles up the coast. Then signal the steamer that you are sinking, or that somebody is badly injured, and common humanity would cause her to stop, even if the captain wasn't in on the deal."

"Yes," I said dubiously. "Only delay is dangerous. If the girls are missed, they might overtake us in Callao. I figured on getting aboard, and being out to sea at one or two in the morning."

"Go on board whenever you like, and stay in the cabin. If the young women escape at all they probably won't be missed until morning and, knowing that no ship is sailing that night and no one would be crazy enough to try to reach Ecuador or Chili in a small boat, they are more apt to think you have made for the mountains."

"I believe the chance is worth taking," I decided. "Engage a vessel for a deep-sea fishing trip for five o'clock Friday morning. Do you want to come with us?"

"I'd like to," he admitted. "But the fact is that there is an English girl in town—"

"Very good. I understand just how it is. I'll meet you in this café for lunch to-morrow, and you can inform me of the arrangements."

We shook hands and, remarking that he was an hour late to work, he hastened to his office while I took the train back to Lima.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SCORNED BY TELEPHONE.

THINGS would have been progressing wonderfully if it had not been for Montez's break about the Señora Escamona. All that remained now was to fix the captain of the Caspian, and collect the three ladies at the appointed hour.

Fortunately, Montez himself had strung along the real estate proposition until Wednesday, which would make it simple for Rupert to ask for a few days to consider, and get in touch with his people in New York, and by sunrise Friday morning, if all went well, we would be well out to sea with Dolores and Nellie, not to mention Violet and MacQuaid, neither of whom would be much help to the party.

In one way, it was an excellent thing to have them along; for the appearance of two beautiful girls and two young men might awaken suspicion in the minds of the fishing captain that an elopement was under way. MacQuaid was bald and past middle age; he could pass for a father or uncle, and Violet, who was no chicken, and who was obviously an American woman, would also lend the air of an excursion rather than of a love affair.

While Violet was convinced that Captain Ralston was madly in love with her, I knew enough about sailors to understand that they blow hot and cold; since landing her in Callao he had probably made love to two or three good-looking passengers; it was possible that he wouldn't even remember her. If he had a remnant of affection for her the knowledge that she had married a Peruvian for his money would probably remove it.

Her letter would be effective as an introduction; after he had read it, he would explain to me that he was very sorry, but Violet would have to apply elsewhere. Then I would get down to brass tacks, flash a roll, and show him how he could make a stake without doing anything unprofessional.

The captain of a British steamer, on board of his own ship, is one of the most dignified and imposing figures imaginable; while an American captain may be just as good a navigator, he can't compare with a Britisher in the impression he makes on the passengers; he lacks the poise and the front.

You never forget that the British captain has dictatorial powers at sea; if he doesn't hang you to the yard arm, or throw you in the brig, you owe it to his forbearance and his natural kindness of heart, and you are never allowed to forget that you have got to mind your P's and Q's even when he seems to unbend a trifle.

For piloting a ten-thousand ton ship around the world, with a cargo worth millions, and carrying hundreds of passengers, a British captain earns rather less than a journeyman bricklayer in America, and he usually has a large family in England complaining of the high cost of living.

For these reasons, it seemed to me that an opportunity to pick up a bankroll without doing anything dishonest or dishonorable might probably interest Captain Ralston much more powerfully than the not too ravishing loveliness of Violet Larue, and I had carte blanche from Rupert to make a deal with him.

Thus I felt pretty confident that Ralston would listen to reason, and I was much more concerned about the collection of the young ladies. Carrying off one girl in the dead of night is often fraught with unforeseen obstacles, and picking up three of them and getting them aboard the boat seemed to me to be a heavy job.

While I would play fair with Violet Larue that was, Señora Natchez to be exact, I determined to waste no time on her. I would give her five minutes to come over the fence into the alley; if she did not put in an appearance, my conscience would be clear.

While I was operating in Callao, an important event occurred in Lima. Rupert, after his sleepless night, had shooed MacQuaid away, and laid himself down for a nap, to be awakened, shortly before noon,

by the ringing of the telephone beside his bed. He rolled over, took off the receiver, and sleepily mumbled: "Hello."

"Señor Grew?" asked a sweet, girlish voice.

"Yes."

"This is Dolores."

Curiously, while considering the impossibility of communicating with the girls, it had not occurred to us how easily they might get in touch with us.

There is a telephone in every wealthy household, and while the señora might be busy supervising in the kitchen or in the bedrooms, there was nothing to prevent Dolores or Nellie from using the phone. Rupert was so delighted and astonished to hear her voice that he lost his senses.

"You darling, you adorable infant, you angel—" he mumbled.

"Never mind, dear friend. Is your companion, Señor Hilton acquainted with Señora Niña Escamona?"

"Why, yes, in a way."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Father was right. The wretch, the beast! And you are probably just as bad!"

"Why, Dolores—" he began, but she did not listen.

"We did not believe it; we supposed it was some horrid story intended to injure your friend, but you have confirmed it. I hate you. Elenora hates him. We hate you both."

"Listen, Dolores. Fred doesn't know her well, and I never met her at all."

"The American men are perfidious; they cannot be trusted. Good-by forever!" exclaimed the angelic Dolores, and with that she hung up on him.

Now if I had answered the phone with my set speech all pat, things would have been very different, and if Rupert, dumb as he was, had been wide awake when she called, he would have had better sense than to make such a damaging admission.

He kept yelling into the phone, unwilling to admit that she had cut him off, and then he was guilty of a prime indiscretion; for he grasped the telephone book, turned the leaves hastily until he found the telephone of Señor Montez, and called the number.

Dolores, of course, had flounced out of the room, and when the telephone rang, fortunately for us, it was answered by a servant who could not understand his pronunciation of "Señorita Dolores Montez," and after two or three minutes of "Como," and "Non sabe," hung up, and left him spluttering.

He was trying to get the number again, in which case the señora would perhaps have answered, and cooked our goose completely, when MacQuaid came into the room, and stopped him.

Mac had sense enough to realize that they could probably trace the call back to the hotel and our rooms, and in a few hours Montez would know that somebody among us was trying to draw his daughter to the telephone.

When I returned to the hotel late in the afternoon, I found Rupert deep in the dumps; after he had confessed the reason, my remarks sunk him very much deeper.

We were very blue at dinner, hardly exchanging a word during the whole hour, and when we went upstairs, as if gloom was not sufficiently profound, there was a note from Señora Escamona lying on the floor inside the door, where it had been thrust by a chamberman.

By this time I had lost all my gratitude for her timely rescue of the night before; because she was responsible for the lamentable condition of my love affair, I hated her, and my first impulse was to tear the note into a thousand pieces without reading it. MacQuaid stayed my hand.

"Better read it, lad; be prepared in case it threatens trouble."

Accordingly, I opened it, got the dictionary, and laboriously wrote out a translation. The señora was not so laconic as usual, and its text was as follows:

DEAR SENOR:

After careful consideration I do not see why I should be punished for what occurred last night. I love only you; I hate Señor Ebbro, and only visited him as an artist visits a manager for business reasons.

Therefore you must forgive me at once, and shed the light of your countenance on me. My heart is breaking, I am losing my strength, it is fortunate I do not enter the Arena before next Sunday.

It is absolutely necessary for us to be reconciled; for I can only fight the bulls when my heart is light and gay, and at present I am desolate. If you do not wish me to die of grief, send me a reply immediately, and tell me when I may see you.

Your adoring

NINA.

"Very eloquent, indeed," commented MacQuaid. "Most pathetic."

"She certainly loves you," grinned Rupert. "Are you sure you haven't given her more encouragement than you admit."

"Hell!" was my only answer.

"A very remarkable letter, most interesting from the psychological standpoint," continued MacQuaid, "and a striking refutation of the argument of the equality of women with men.

"The feminists maintain that woman depends upon man only because of her physical weakness, and her lack of proper education. Teach her to support herself, give her an opportunity for proper physical and mental development, and she can dispense with man entirely according to those writers.

"Yet here is a woman of tremendous courage and enormous physical strength, following an occupation in competition with the bravest and most audacious men, capable, I suppose of killing any of us in a struggle, with bare hands, powerful enough to capture any male who pleases her fancy as the cavemen of old captured their women and, when she falls in love, what happens?"

"You tell it," I said in disgust.

"She becomes a poor, weak, loving female, appealing where she might command, groveling to a very ordinary specimen who happens to be a male."

"Much obliged," I growled.

"She pines, she languishes, she implores, she acknowledges the master, not that you are capable of being her master, but because a woman in love requires a master, adores to think that a man commands her."

"I wish I thought so," I retorted. "I'm only scared that she may burst in that door, and throw me over her shoulder, and carry me off to her lair. Why did I ever look at her?"

"That's what I want to know," said Rupert with acerbity. "If you hadn't flirted with her in the first place these terrible things wouldn't have happened."

"And if you hadn't made eyes at Dolores in a box at a theater in New York, these things wouldn't have happened either."

"That's different," he said weakly.

"Well, I'll make an engagement with Escamona to have dinner with me on Friday," I decided.

"And that's a dirty trick, too," he meanly observed.

"For the love of Pizarro, what can I do? I don't want this woman. I never gave her any encouragement. Besides, I'm taking a terrible chance of having to keep the date. It doesn't look to me as though the girls would have anything more to do with us, and I'm hanged if I leave Lima without Nellie."

I wrote the señora in very bad Spanish that I had engagements for Wednesday and Thursday, but would dine with her on Friday if she could arrange it, and gave it to a chamberman to deliver. Then I said good night to my disconsolate friends, and departed for my own miserable hotel.

With everything at sixes and sevens, it seemed as though I would be unable to close an eye, but having gone entirely without slumber the night before, I dropped off immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep, and did not awaken until ten o'clock next day.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BEAUTY PARLOR.

WHILE it may be always darkest just before dawn, I slept so late that morning that I could not substantiate the statement; but I woke with a sense of deepest gloom, for it rushed on me when I opened my eyes that the only girl I had ever seen whose good opinion meant very much was convinced that I was a scoundrel, and there wasn't any way for me to prove to her that I wasn't.

I dressed languidly, obsessed with a notion that it wasn't worth while to go on

living, and anybody who bumped me off would be doing me the greatest possible service. However, I wandered over to call on Rupert and Mac, because I had the habit, and when I entered the salon, Rupert, who was up and dressed, thrust into my hands a letter.

"The señora has changed her perfume," he informed me, but a glance at the handwriting told me it was not the señora's script; for she followed the European fashion of using a very fine pen, and writing thin, small letters, while this, though a woman's hand, was in round, and almost vertical script.

Probably Violet, I surmised as I tore it open; then glanced at the signature, and my heart gave a thump because it was signed "Elenora."

"Señor," it began, not even a "Caro," which showed the way she felt about me!

SENOR:

I was horrified to learn of your perfidy from my uncle, which was confirmed by your friend over the telephone to my cousin. Perhaps I do not blame you for loving a brave and famous woman, but you were despicable to deceive me. I despise you, and I would prefer not to see you any more.

But in case there is any justification possible for your offense, anything you wish to tell me, go to the rear door of the beauty parlor of Francesca Sousa at 117 Miraflores at eleven, knock twice, and enter.

My aunt accompanies Dolores and myself to Sousa's, but she sits in the front while I enter a cabinet for facial massage and shampoo. Francesca will bring you into the cabinet, and you may tell me then what you have to say, though I warn you that nothing you tell me will I believe. ELENORA.

"What a talent for intrigue that young woman possesses!" said MacQuaid, greatly shocked.

"I'll go with you!" exclaimed Rupert. "Dolores will be there, too."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," I asserted. "Do you want to ruin everything? If I square myself, I square you, and while this Francesca person might conceal one man, she can't hide two. Leave this entirely to me."

"The poor, trustful aunt sits in the front of the store, while the young wretch has you introduced through the back door," continued the minister. "Such deceit I never heard!"

"It's what they get for treating their women so badly," said Rupert. "That is the most ingenious scheme I ever heard of."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "It's ten minutes to eleven now. Good day."

I hailed a taxi driver when I was in the street, and gave him the address, and the man positively leered at me, which caused me to wonder if Señora Sousa used her rear door in this manner very often; most likely, though, he was amused that a man was going to a woman's beauty parlor, and thought somebody had put up a job on a simple Americano.

At one minute of eleven I knocked twice on the door bearing the number 117. Evidently Calle Miraflores was at the rear of the shop which must run through a block, but the blocks were narrow at that point.

Immediately the door was opened by a fat half-breed woman with gray hair who grinned at me, led me through a kitchen, opened a door on the farther side, blocking the passage in front of me with her bulk, pushed open a door at the right, and I found myself in a small room containing two barber's chairs, facing a very big mirror with a shelf at the bottom containing all sorts of toilet articles and at one side a white porcelain washstand.

The room was empty. As she made signs to me to climb into one of the chairs, I obeyed, whereupon she pinned a white sheet around me, took wet towels and covered my face, then emptied liquid soap upon my red hair, and began to work up a foamy lather.

I tried to protest during this ridiculous ceremony, but the fat woman put her finger to her lips, and I subsided. My eyes were uncovered, and through the mirror I saw the door behind me open, and an attendant ushered in Nellie, Dolores, and the Señora Montez.

There was conversation in Spanish between the señora and the fat mestizo; then Nellie climbed into the chair beside me, while the señora led Dolores away, probably to another cabinet.

Greatly mortified at being discovered by the girl I loved in such a highly absurd

situation, I was further chagrined to hear the sweet child giggling, and I tried to say something, but there was a wet towel over my mouth, and all I could utter was "glub, glub, glub."

"Oh, Frederico," tittered Nellie. "You do look so funny!"

Then the confederate of my sweetheart removed the cloths from my face, and I gazed at Nellie sheepishly. The attendant was already loosening her gold hair, and it fell like a bright cloud around her face causing her to look so ravishing that I was speechless, which Nellie did not fail to appreciate; for she was perfectly aware that she looked like an angel with her hair down.

"Speak," she commanded. "We have only a few minutes."

"You look so beautiful, darling," I murmured, most likely the best thing I could have said; for she smiled delightedly.

"More beautiful than Señora Escamona with her hair down?" she demanded sweetly.

"I don't know. I never saw her like that."

"No? You never kissed her, I presume you will tell me."

"I never did." That was true. It was the señora who kissed me, by force.

"Do you love her very much?" she asked softly.

"I do not. You are the only girl I ever loved."

"Then how does it happen you are called the lover of the señora?"

I started to repeat my speech of which I had been so proud, but Nellie was looking straight at me, and if I lost her, I couldn't lie to her. So I made a clean breast of the whole story, and truth is strong, and will prevail; Nellie believed me. Probably she wanted to believe me.

"You still want to run away with me, and never see the señora again?" she asked when I had finished.

"I don't care if I never see her again, but it will kill me if I lose you."

"Then better not lose me," said the darling, extending her hand from her chair to mine. That was enough, I was out of the chair, and succeeded in kissing her right in front of the fat woman who firmly grasped me by the collar, and pulled me away while she talked furiously in Spanish to Nellie.

"The señora says you must go now while my aunt is in the other cabinet. She must work on me, and I do not wish you to see me with cold cream on my face—not yet."

"But I've only just come," I protested.

"Thursday night we shall be ready," she said firmly. "Good-by, Señor Frederico."

With the sheet still around me and with my hair white with lather, Francesca propelled me out of the cabinet, through the corridor, and back into the kitchen, where she removed the sheet, rubbed a wet towel over my hair, and held out her hand into which I placed six silver sols, all the change I had.

Then she opened the back door, and I was out in the street, happy as a child who has just eaten pink ice cream. Nellie had forgiven me, all was well, we could go ahead with our scheme, the sky was blue, and the sun was shining.

Being a cynic by profession, I did consider for a moment the uncanny craft by which the interview was arranged; it was no haphazard management, and I wondered how the deuce my innocent little sweetheart had prepared for it—had she ever done it before?

But I knew better than that. Francesca, of course, made a business of introducing men into her beauty parlor; she had technique, perfect technique.

How diabolically clever it was to have me in the chair shrouded and plastered with towels, my hair a mass of soapy lather so that I looked to the señora when she inspected the place like a bulky female getting a treatment!

Most likely some girl of Nellie's acquaintance had met her lover in this manner and told of it, which caused Nellie to call upon the beauty-shop proprietress when she had need of her.

Since it was all for my benefit, it was not for me to criticize; I decided to be perfectly content with the arrangement, but I hoped I would never have to do it again,

and I would make a note of the trick for a farce I intended to write some day.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RUPERT BUYS SOME SAND DUNES.

WEDNESDAY dawned bright and fair; no incident worth recording had disturbed our serenity, although we were pestered by Peruvian gentlemen who had wonderful ideas to submit to us in connection with the great plan. At my suggestion, Rupert refused to see all of them, which caused the town to believe that we knew exactly what we were about.

My assurances to Rupert that Dolores, as well as Nellie, was content again, that they had not lost their courage, and we might depend upon them, had assuaged his anxiety; MacQuaid had packed most of his things in preparation for the voyage, and time hung heavily on our hands as there was so much to do which could not be done until the last minute.

And then Señor Montez arrived to take us to lunch. Although he had originally invited only Rupert, he extended the invitation to me, because he was shrewd enough to realize that I had a lot of influence with the magnate, but MacQuaid he pointedly ignored, and we departed, leaving the dominie in a huff.

We found ourselves in a private room at the club, and ate a very delicious lunch during which he discussed the approaching funeral of the president, the state of the weather, everything except what was most important to him.

When the coffee was finally set before us, the señor opened a brief case which he had brought with him, took out a package of papers, and some blue prints and made a speech.

"Although, until now, I have not brought up the subject which is responsible for your being in Lima, señor," he said, "like most of our citizens, I have been intensely interested and eager to be of service. There is a general impression that you will decide upon one of two suburbs, Marengo or Montego for your development. I happen to be confident that you have made no decision."

Rupert nodded wisely. "You are right," he said.

"And you are quite right," he smiled. "Already there has been such a rise in value in those suburbs that you would find them highly undesirable for your purpose. Now for a pleasure city, a winter resort for your people, it seems to me that something entirely different would be best.

"I remind you of the development in Havana where the American colony has settled nearly ten miles outside the city, and constructed race tracks, casino, beach resorts, summer hotels, and villas, where land is cheap, where city noises are far away, yet from which a motorist can be in the Prado in twenty minutes.

"Now it happens that about twelve miles away from here, on the seashore, where there is a wonderful white sand beach, is an entirely uninhabited tract of land, extensive enough for all purposes, possessing a good water supply, with room for golf courses, polo grounds, race track, casino, hotels and residences; where the air is salubrious, where the sun always shines, where a reef protects the beach from marine monsters—a perfect paradise waiting to be developed.

"It is near enough to the city for visits; of course your residents will be motorists; far enough away to be comfortable. If you choose this tract which is about two miles by five miles, you will find the government eager to coöperate with you in every way.

"In fact, for a period of ten years, I can guarantee freedom from taxation, and I can assure you that the government will build and equip without charge to the company a municipal casino of the very finest type."

"How about laying out streets, piping water, and improvements," I suggested, to sound businesslike.

"The government will bear fifty per cent of such improvements."

"How can you guarantee these things?" asked Rupert.

Montez smiled confidentially. "Between ourselves," he said, "this tract is the property of Señor Morfero, the new president,

which he has sold to me, as he could not appear personally in such a transaction. Naturally, the government will be interested, and the president and myself own much more land in the vicinity, which will increase greatly in value as the result of your development."

"And the price?" asked Rupert.

"Nothing. A quarter of a million of your dollars, and a ten per cent interest for me personally in the stock of your corporation. We shall motor down and look the ground over immediately, if you don't mind."

There was no way we could draw out, though we knew Montez was upon a wild-goose chase, and we hated to think of his remarks when he learned what we were really after; accordingly, we followed him down and entered his big car, which immediately began to break traffic regulations.

In a very short time, we ran off the good road, and began to labor over sandy paths through a very unprepossessing country. Occasionally, we passed miserable native huts with half a dozen naked children running about in front of each door, but soon we left those behind, and were alone in the desert.

I thought the big car would get stalled in deep sand a dozen times, but eventually we came out among sand dunes fringed by grayish-green patches of discouraged vegetation, and the Pacific, smiling and exquisite, stretched before us.

"We are there," said Montez.

Rupert looked over the rolling sandy country, its little hills completely bare and sun-blistered, but he said nothing.

"I suppose the government can be depended upon to put through a road," I said with my tongue in my cheek.

Rupert got out of the car and pretended to be examining the soil with an important frown. I looked at the beach. It was a good beach, but the waves that were rolling in would break the back of any but the strongest swimmers in the world. I never saw such terrific breakers.

"Nice safe beach," I murmured.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the señor. "And I assure you the road will be started as soon as we close the deal. As for that soil, it is very rich; all it needs is water."

"I don't know," said Rupert thoughtfully. "I do not think it is very good soil, but irrigation would undoubtedly help it a lot."

"And what do you think?" asked the señor anxiously. Then Rupert astounded me:

"How much do you want for a three months' option at your price of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"

"Oh, a trifle. Say five thousand dollars."

"Very good," he said. "Have the option drawn up, and the title proved to my satisfaction, and you may have your money when we get back to the city."

It's a wonder the señor didn't kiss him. He lost his air of benevolent dignity, his tongue got loose, and he positively babbled. Meanwhile, I regarded Rupert with indignation and alarm; it seemed to me that his worries had caused him to lose his mind.

Of course, we had been pushed into a situation, but he should have hedged, and declared he would have to consult New York, anything for two days' delay; instead, he had pledged himself to throw away five thousand dollars in good American currency for the most unprepossessing stretch of country that it was ever my misfortune to look upon. Because Montez was with us, I couldn't say anything, but I looked volumes.

When we had returned to the city and Montez left us for a few minutes to prepare the option, I grabbed Rupert by the shoulder and demanded an explanation.

"What are you, Death Valley Scott, that you chuck away five thousand dollars? What's the matter with you—are you trying to give away your money? If that's it, give it to me instead of that four-flushing bunco steerer. That's the worst-looking development I ever saw, and I've seen all they offer back home."

"I've got the money," said Rupert. "I want Montez to be happy and contented, and I'd spend a hundred thousand to get away safely with Dolores. Does that satisfy you?"

"But this is so unnecessary," I moaned. "You could have stalled."

"I think he was a little suspicious," he replied. "This will allay his mind. After all, it's my money."

"Then you can go to the devil," I declared in a huff.

Rupert gave him a draft upon his bank in New York, and received his option; then we both shook hands with Montez, who regarded me so benevolently that I understood that, in exchange for Rupert being a sucker, I was forgiven for eavesdropping upon their plot.

After all, why not? Thanks to the opportune death of poor old Barco, Montez and his gang had been saved from a crime, and my mouth had been shut because it would not be sensible for me to open it. No man as shrewd as this one would have been taken in by my cock-and-bull story.

What I said to Rupert regarding his prodigality was nothing compared to the grief and indignation of the Hieland mon when I broke the news to MacQuaid.

"The pity of it—the pity of it!" he kept repeating. "Mon, how could ye be so wicked?"

"I blew in a couple of hundred thousand in two years in New York," Rupert told us with a laugh. "I'm saving money since I came to Lima. But if you fellows don't shut up, I'll take up the option; I could do it and have a few dollars left."

"A fool and his money—" said MacQuaid scornfully.

That afternoon there came a note from Violet, reminding me of our engagement; how she smuggled it into the mails I don't know.

And next morning the newspapers burst forth with the news of our purchase of Tequilla, which was the name of the sea bottom upon which we had an option for five thousand dollars.

They plastered it all over their front pages with full details, undoubtedly furnished by Montez; and one of the papers, with enterprise worthy of New York, had caused an artist to draw a town that looked like Monte Carlo, explaining it was how Tequilla would look in five years or less.

After we had laughed over that, I said good-by and started out upon the important mission of suborning the captain of the Caspian, which was due that morning. I saw her lying out in the bay when I left the train in Callao, a squat one-funneled steamer of about five thousand tons, with a short deckhouse, for she carried few passengers and much cargo.

I had made the trip down on her with the Ginsburg company, and had seen the captain, but had not cultivated him, being engaged in a poker game during most of the voyage. Now I wished we had been chums.

As she had landed her passengers, and the tender was not making another trip, I hired a small launch to take me out to her—a run which we made in about five minutes. To the quartermaster at the gangway I stated that I had a letter to be delivered personally to Captain Ralston, and waited on the deck beside the ladder until the messenger he had sent came back with word that the skipper would see me.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE CASPIAN.

AS I passed along the deck I admired the spotlessness of everything, such a contrast to the town I had left, and considered how remarkable it is that the British set such store by cleanliness; no matter how small or ancient a passenger steamer, the officers manage to keep it as neat as wax.

Ralston, who was a small, clean-cut, dignified individual with a youthful face but gray hair, received me in his cabin, and recalled me immediately, although he did not remember my name.

"Hilton," I reminded him. "I came down with the Ginsburg company from Guayaquil to Callao."

"Ah, the blondes," he smiled. "There was one young woman, a Violet Something-or-other—she was very amusing."

"Then you'll enjoy reading this," I said as I presented to him her wail for aid. He read it with a pucker of his lips, shook his head sadly, and laid it down.

"Poor girl!" he said. "I can't do anything for her."

"She seemed to think you would do anything for her," I reproached him.

"She is a Peruvian subject," he declared. "Since she has married the man, she must make the best of it. She was pretty gay, and sober living will do her a lot of good. You realize that I couldn't possibly take her on board without the consent of her husband. It just isn't done in these countries; it would be a misdemeanor, and I'd lose my berth in a flash when the owners heard of it."

"I had an idea you would look at it like that," I said sadly. "Now, supposing you were sailing the high seas, and fell in with a small vessel which claimed to be in distress and asked you to take a passenger off."

"Why," he said thoughtfully, "that would be different. And the lady could claim to be an American citizen, conceal from me that she was married to a Peruvian. In that case I would land her at Panama, unless I got instructions from Lima to return her."

"Now, here's another supposition. Suppose there was a party of three women and three men on that small boat, and they all wanted to be taken off; it's the same principle, isn't it?"

"What's the purpose of this?" he asked sharply. "Are there two others of your blondes in distress?"

"Elopements," I said frankly. "I am in love with a Peruvian girl, and so is my friend Rupert Grew. We plan to put to sea, all four of us, in company with Violet and a Scotch minister who is a friend of ours. My idea is that you shall marry us to the girls, making them American citizens, just as soon as we get on board."

"Well, I won't do it," he retorted; "it's entirely irregular."

"Mr. Grew is very rich," I said softly. "I don't see how you can help picking up castaways, and if they are so grateful they want to present you with a thousand dollars, why should you refuse? You are not overpaid, you know."

Captain Ralston looked at me steadily. "I could use a thousand dollars in cash," he said. "Have you got it?"

"Yes."

"I might stop the ship and pick you up, but under no circumstances would I perform the marriage ceremony. It would look suspicious, my friend, and a thousand dollars would not compensate me for losing my berth."

"Two thousand," I bid.

"No, nor five. It's useless."

I could tell by his tone that he could not be bribed, and without marriage we would be in danger, even on the Caspian. We would undoubtedly be traced; the skipper of the fishing boat would report that she had taken us off, and the Peruvian authorities would persuade the officials of Ecuador or Panama to return the girls.

Ralston did not terminate the interview; he tapped with his fingers on his table. Suddenly he looked up with a smile.

"You say your sixth person is a regularly ordained minister?"

"Yes."

"Let him perform the ceremony."

"But it's illegal!" I gasped.

"No more than a ceremony by me. When you are three miles from land you are on the open ocean; no country's laws regarding license or other restrictions on matrimony prevail.

"If your man is a minister, he can bind you hard and fast. I assure you it will be perfectly legal. Then your wives are really American citizens; Peru cannot recover them. You can land at Panama, take ship for New York, and live happily ever after."

I regarded the Englishman in admiration.

"And I never thought of that!" I exclaimed. "Here we have been associating with this minister for a week, and we couldn't understand why we tolerated him; but he was sent by Providence to save us. Even if you didn't pick us up, and we were married outside the three-mile limit, we would be safe."

"Not if they captured you," he said with a short laugh. "They would take the girls away, have the marriage annulled, or declare that it was illegally performed because the girls were Catholics and the clergyman was a Protestant, or they could send you to prison for kidnaping or make

the girls widows without resorting to the courts."

He made a sign indicating cutting a throat, which made me experience a feeling of illness.

"This ship is British territory; you are safe on board outside the jurisdiction of Peru, not otherwise. I shall want the thousand in advance."

I counted it over, we shook hands, and, feeling very much better, I departed from the Caspian, was ferried rapidly to the landing stage, and set out in search of Mr. Henry Schwab, upon whose good offices now everything depended.

I was chuckling inside when I thought of poor old MacQuaid. What a piece of good fortune it was to have been nourishing a clergyman in our bosom, so to speak, to have induced him to accompany us on the elopement with no ulterior motive whatsoever, and all the time it was in the power of the old boy to make everything right for us.

We had tolerated MacQuaid because he was a quaint and fantastic individual who happened to amuse Rupert by his acidity, his narrowness, his Scotchness, if you know what I mean, and who had a fund of sound, common sense which both Rupert and I lacked.

Rupert had paid his bills because he was that kind of a fellow; he was paying my bills, too, if you come right down to it, but I was working for him and delivering the goods; it was through my stroke of genius he had found Dolores. Now it appeared that MacQuaid would deliver the goods also.

I felt very kindly toward the eminent jitney lecturer; I even pardoned his low and frankly expressed opinion of myself.

I found Mr. Schwab at the rendezvous, growing impatient because I was late, and he had already consumed his lunch.

"Well?" I demanded as I dropped into a chair opposite him.

He nodded. "All fixed. You be at the Maria pier at 5 A.M., and you'll find the schooner San Pedro tied up there. I'll get up early to make sure there is no hitch in proceedings. You pay fifty dollars for the vessel—half when she sails, and the remainder when you leave the ship. And warn your lady friends to talk English all the time."

"Here's the balance of your hundred," I said, passing the money across the table.

"I'll only take thirty more," he demurred. "And I'm robbing you at that; but when we made the dicker I supposed I was conniving at breaking the port regulations."

"It's worth the whole hundred," I insisted.

"Well, if you feel like that, slip me fifty; never mind the rest. I am perfectly satisfied."

So we settled our business in that manner.

"I see by the morning papers," he grinned, "that your friend, Mr. Grew, has bought about ten miles of desert fifteen miles from anywhere. It's my opinion he's crazy."

"Then, why is he at large?"

He shrugged and laughed. "He'd have to be crazier still for the Peruvians to notice it when he is presenting them with large sums of money. It's lucky he's leaving, or they'd take his B. V. D.'s."

"I'll see you at five in the morning; wait for us an hour or two, as there's a possibility we may be delayed."

"I'll bet you the fifty you've just given me that you never get here," he suggested. "One woman might take a chance, and there's a possibility that two might, but getting three of them to do the same thing at the same time? Never in the world!"

"Life in the tropics has turned you into a cynic," I scoffed; but inwardly I was inclined to agree with him, for everything was proceeding too smoothly, with almost suspicious serenity, and, as MacQuaid says:

"Women are kittle cattle."

We shook hands, and I caught the train for Lima, reflecting upon the ease with which an apparently hopeless enterprise seemed to have arranged itself. It was now entirely up to the girls, provided that nothing happened to interfere with the freedom of motion of Rupert, myself, and MacQuaid during the next eight or ten hours.

Rupert was awaiting me anxiously at the hotel, and he saw by my face that all was well; but when I told him that we would be married before we boarded the steamer he danced a hornpipe, then dragged MacQuaid out of his chamber and informed him of his important rôle in the adventure.

The minister looked perplexed.

"I never heard of such a thing," he said. "Still I suppose it is proper, and you say the captain said so. Marriage, of course, is purely a religious ceremony, and it's only in recent years that communities have insisted upon permission of the civil authorities.

"On the open sea, where the law of no land carries, a marriage by a regularly ordained clergyman ought to be perfectly legal. Only you need two witnesses."

"Violet!" I suggested. "And an extra fifty dollars will induce Schwab to make the trip with us. There are your witnesses."

"And a certificate signed by me and the witnesses."

"Sit down at that desk and write out your certificates now, so you will be sure to have them," commanded Rupert.

Mac seated himself, took pen in hand, and then hesitated.

"It's very queer," he observed with his customary caution, "that the captain of the steamer wouldn't perform the ceremonies. It may be that there is some risk entailed, some peril to the person who marries you, that he knows about, and I do not."

"The captain has his job to think of," I explained patiently. "He is picking us up because he can claim it is his duty, but if he picked us up and also married us it might look to his owners as though he was in the plot, which means he would lose his berth, as they would not like to offend influential residents of Lima.

"Now, you have no job, and you are an American citizen, safe on board a British ship; so what risk do you run?"

"True for ye," said the Celt. "I'll take the chance and do it, not so much for you, because I'm not sure you are a fit husband for a pure young girl, but for Rupert, who deserves anything I can do for him."

"So long as you agree to do it," I mumbled. It was no time to take offense at his words.

"While you were gone," said Rupert, "it occurred to me that we could be easily traced through the driver of the motor car who took us to Callao."

"I never thought of that," I admitted. "It's perfectly true."

"So I rented a big car, and called up Montez, who was kind enough to secure me a driver's license without the usual delay. I hated to do a thing like that to the man whose daughter I am stealing; but it was an emergency, don't you think so?"

"Poetic justice after he cheated you out of five thousand cash for an option on a piece of the Sahara."

"One wrong doesn't justify another," admonished MacQuaid. "I am glad ye didn't consult me, Rupert."

"If the girls don't lose their nerve," Rupert sighed. "Mac, you might pray to give them strength."

"It's a matter for their own consciences, the poor lassies, and not at all a subject upon which to approach the Almighty. Personally ye have my best wishes."

"Don't forget your prayerbook tonight," I warned him. "This marriage has got to be done right."

"I have married many better men than you," said the reverend sourly; and Rupert winked to me not to make any reply.

The rest of the day, for all of us, was the longest afternoon and evening of our lives. I went over and packed, and paid my bill. As I traveled with only two suit cases, my baggage was a simple matter. Rupert had a big trunk, from which he moved what he cherished, and decided to abandon the rest of his chattels.

MacQuaid would not hear of leaving his trunk behind him; so Rupert had him pack it, and paid to send it to the express office to be shipped to Panama. The departure of the lecturer would not occasion any comment, but Grew feared to have it noised around the hotel that he was about to leave Lima.

He decided not to pay his bill until the last minute, and then announce he was going to stay with friends. Late in the afternoon we went for a ride in the big car

he had hired, and ran out to Calle Flores so that we would have no trouble finding the place at night.

As Montez had hooked his fish and landed him, he saw no reason for bothering with us that day, which left us entirely free; besides, he was busy with the funeral arrangements of the late president, who was to be buried with great pomp and circumstance on Friday, keeping him longer than one would suppose proper in a hot country.

CHAPTER XXX.

A TRIPLE ELOPEMENT.

I WAS so nervous I couldn't eat anything at dinner, and Rupert felt the same way, but the parson made a good meal; he was more calm than either of us, but, of course, he did not have so much at stake.

We discussed over and over our arrangements, which seemed to us to be inadequate, much too sketchy. We had instructed the girls to be waiting inside the door in the garden wall at eleven thirty; suppose they made a mistake in the hour?

If all went well, we would barely have time to pick them up and drive down to Beneventes and San Ysidro, where I would get out and enter the alley to receive the Señora Natchez as she came over the fence.

With our precious freight in the car we could not risk a moment's delay in the streets of Lima; what if a policeman undertook to look in the car, and found two native ladies with men who were obviously Americans?

Violet would have to be on time to the minute; if not she would be left behind. I hoped her stage training would cause her to be punctual.

In a fast motor car we could make Callao in half an hour, and we would have a wait of four hours and a half before our rendezvous on the pier; that was the perilous part of the enterprise. During that long wait, Montez and Natchez would have ample time to overtake us if they happened to discover their loss.

Perhaps Natchez would not pursue. He was going to be in luck if he only knew it; but it was certain that Montez would be after us with blood in his eyes.

Rupert had been shrewd enough to secure a big sedan which had curtains on the windows so that we could conceal our beautiful passengers, and we congratulated ourselves that Lima was a wide-open town with a good many roisterers roaming about in machines, visiting cafés and gambling houses until all hours of the morning.

We discussed the disposal of the car, and decided to put our party on board the yacht, and then Rupert would run it to a garage, and check it, so that it would not be left standing at the pier in mute testimony of our manner of escape.

The hours slowly passed until it was ten thirty when Rupert called for his bill, and we put our bags in the car, and told the night clerk that we were going a little way into the mountains to spend a few days with friends.

MacQuaid was quivering with excitement now that the adventure had begun; it was the first real thrill the poor little man had experienced in his whole life, and in truth I was in a considerable state myself. Our hero, now that the time had come, was calm and collected, and took command of the expedition. I let him.

We rolled aimlessly through the streets for half an hour, then started slowly out toward Marengo. Once we were spoken to by a traffic cop, and I shivered for fear we would be dragged to a station; however, the officer was content with a reprimand for a slight infraction of rules, after which I implored Rupert to make no more breaks.

"I'll stop the car at the corner," he said when we approached the street behind Flores, the name of which we never had learned. "You walk down, and tap on the door. If the girls are there, step to the curb so I can see you, then I'll dash down the street, pick you all up, and be away from here in a minute. The only reason I send you is because I have to operate the car."

"It's all right with me," I assured him. "I prefer action to waiting."

He turned the car into the end of the street, I jumped out hearing the chauffeur breathe: "Good luck, old man." I waved

my hand, and walked rapidly with my heart in my mouth. If they failed us now! If anything had happened!

In my state of mind I passed the inconspicuous little door, but realized it, and returned. Before I had time to tap upon it, it opened a crack, then wide, and I saw the old woman who had been Cupid's messenger from the first. She said something to the darkness behind her, and Nellie threw herself into my arms.

"Where is Rupert?" demanded Dolores.

"He's coming in the car," I assured her. "I'll call him."

I stepped to the curb, and in a few seconds Rupert's machine, running as noiselessly as though it knew the importance of silence, slid alongside of me.

Immediately the two girls skipped out upon the sidewalk, I opened the rear door, and they piled into the tonneau to give startled gasps when they found a third man in the party. On their heels came the old woman laden with bags, who proceeded to climb in after them.

"Here, here," I expostulated. "You're not going."

"But assuredly," said Nellie. "She is our nurse. She must go. My father would kill her if we left her behind."

I followed nursie into the car, then Rupert slipped in his gears, and we trundled away, having pulled off the smoothest elopement on record.

I pulled down the curtains, introduced MacQuaid, and found Nellie's hand in the dark, or thought I had until she giggled and told me I was holding hands with the old woman.

"Are you sure your father doesn't suspect anything?" I asked Dolores.

"To-night," said Dolores, "father is one of a guard of honor which watches beside the bier of the dead president."

I grinned in the dark. "And do you happen to know if Señor Carlos Natchez is also a member of that guard?"

"Sí, señor. His name was on the list in the afternoon newspaper."

"We picked a fine night for it," I told Rupert, who nodded, and wished he was in back beside Dolores instead of running the car. Perhaps it sounds rather brutal to be amused at carrying off the women while the men stood on watch beside the late President Barco, but knowing what we knew about how Montez and Natchez had felt about Barco when he was alive we wasted no sympathy upon them.

Rupert had his eye on the clock, and timed the return to the city so that we should reach Calle Beneventes at a minute or two before midnight, while I explained to the girls that another lady was accompanying us, whom they immediately assumed was eloping with MacQuaid.

The poor youngsters were giggling and tittering because they were hysterical—for, if this adventure was an exciting one for Rupert and myself, think how it must have affected two innocent, sheltered young girls who were violating all the conventions of their country, and were entrusting themselves without recourse to the honor and decency of men who were not of their own nation.

During the trip back into the city I explained to the girls the arrangements for the elopement in full detail, taking particular pains to inform them that it was to the Señora Natchez's influence with the captain of the Caspian that we owed our opportunity to escape. Otherwise I was afraid that the ladies might not welcome Violet with open arms; that hard-boiled ex-chorus girl was not their sort.

What a lucky break for Violet, I thought, our selection of the time for the elopement having fallen upon the one night when her husband would be away until morning. As a married woman it ordinarily might have been a matter of extreme difficulty for her to go down the water spout from her conjugal chamber; to-night it would be comparatively simple.

It was a marvelous piece of good fortune for us all, as a matter of fact, as the guard of honor would undoubtedly be on duty until breakfast time; it reduced the danger of discovery and pursuit to a minimum, it was unlikely that Señora Montez would discover the absence of the girls before eight in the morning, by which hour we should be thirty miles north of Callao.

Dolores told me that she had left a note of farewell to her mother explaining that

she and Elenora had gone off with the men of their choice, and would be married immediately; fortunately the child was shrewd enough not to tell our names.

At one minute of twelve Rupert stopped the car at the corner of San Ysidro and Beneventes, and I slipped out, looked up and down the street, saw no one, and turned into the alley which was very dark.

I counted off thirty paces, and stopped, and began to whistle very softly a few bars from "Sidewalks of New York," which struck me as a very appropriate signal for Violet. And a second later I heard from above:

"That you, Fred?"

"Yes."

"Is it fixed?"

"All arranged. Come on if you're coming."

Violet had told no lie when she said she was an acrobat. Holding a small suit case in one hand, she let herself over the wall, hanging by her right arm, then dropping and landing like a cat on her feet.

"You're a peach!" she exclaimed. Then she threw her arms around my neck, and kissed me.

"Get all that out of your system here and now," I said ungraciously. "My girl is in the car, and if she sees you do anything like this it will wreck the show."

We scurried up to the mouth of the alley; then I pulled her back as I heard footsteps which turned out to have been those of a policeman who hastened his pace as he passed the dark passage. Probably he didn't relish alleys any more than our New York cops.

I pushed her into the car with the rest of the crowd, and climbed into the seat beside Rupert. There were five of them back there, probably the largest eloping party in the history of Lima.

"Five hours ahead of us," Rupert groaned as we moved on. "What on earth are we going to do?"

"Keep on moving. Kill an hour or so seeing the night life of Lima. They'll think we are a mob of joy riders; there are so many of us. Then loaf down to Callao as though you were in no hurry, that will destroy another hour.

"Maybe we can sail around the streets of that place for half an hour without attracting attention. The rest of the time we'll have to sit in the car."

Rupert considered this good advice, and improved it by telling the girls to put up the curtains because no one would suspect a party of four women, and it was too dark to see their faces.

If I had been alone with Nellie, those five hours would have dashed by like five minutes, but in that throng there could be no real conversation, and no spooning, and we were all nervous; even Violet was so worried that she was no help to the party.

It wasn't so bad when we were moving, but when we finally stopped the car on a deserted street in the business district of Callao we suffered agonies of impatience.

When we had been stationary an hour a policeman spied us, and came over to demand what we were doing there. As we men spoke no Spanish we were stumped, but Nellie saved the situation by telling him we were out of petrol and had sent for some, which satisfied him, and he went about his business.

The girls had brought cloaks and were warm, but we men had only our ordinary clothing, without vests, like most Americans in the tropics, and a cold, damp mist came off the ocean and chilled us. In the end it came to be five o'clock, and I directed Rupert to the Maria pier where Schwab and the schooner should be ready for us.

With relief I picked out the figure of Schwab standing at the foot of the pier, which was just an uncovered wharf, and he waved his hand to me as the car drew up, gazing sharply at the three girls who came out of the interior of the craft. I introduced him to the young women, to Rupert and MacQuaid, but he had eyes only for Nellie and Dolores. He got a chance to whisper to me:

"Which is your girl?"

"The red-headed one."

"Well, she's a lulu all right, and so is the dark girl. I don't care so much for the other one."

"You and me, friend," I said. "Our taste runs the same way."

Schwab and I got our hand bags on board,

and Rupert ran the car off to a garage which we could see a few blocks away. Then I opened negotiations with Schwab to accompany us as a witness. At first he demurred because he would lose a day at his office, but fifty dollars squared that.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SEASICK BRIDES.

ALTHOUGH it was still rather dark, we could make out some sort of craft tied up at the side of the pier, and presently a person approached, whom Schwab informed me was the captain, an assurance I needed as, otherwise, I might have thought he was one of the pirates of the dark past of the Pacific.

He wore a red handkerchief around his neck, and he had a red scarf holding up what started out to be a pair of trousers, but got discouraged just below the knee, and became a fringe. He had on a very torn shirt, he was minus one eye, and when he smiled it was evident that pyorrhea had done its worst to him.

When Schwab addressed him in Spanish he bowed and scraped, and explained in five or six hundred words that his poor ship was entirely at our service.

While he intended to be polite in his description of his vessel, it turned out to be quite accurate; for she was a poor ship, in truth a very disreputable sloop about seventy feet long, her deck a mess of nets and tackle, with a big brown sail loosened on the boom.

From her in'ards came a perfume which seemed to be part garlic and onions, and part decaying fish and vegetable matter, and right away I knew I was going to be seasick.

"Not one foot do I step on that thing," exclaimed Violet, profoundly disgusted.

"Suit yourself, lady," I told her. "The walking is good back to Lima."

"I don't see why we can't go right on board the Caspian," she pouted.

"Your admirer the captain won't let you; you've got to be fifty miles away from here before he will have anything to do with you."

Dolores and Nellie made grimaces of distaste, but the darlings did not protest audibly. Nellie took my hand, and let me lead her aboard, while Dolores followed with Rupert, and Violet decided to come along, too.

MacQuaid and Schwab brought up the rear. Hardly were they on board, when three or four nearly naked Indians cast off the lines, and then began to lift the jib, and we moved silently out upon the black water.

The captain approached to invite us to go below, but without consulting anybody else I smiled sweetly at him and said: "God forbid!" a remark that Schwab translated with more consideration for his feelings, for, after all, he probably thought he had a very fine vessel.

Nellie and I have often looked back upon that voyage as the high light of our romance, but romance has a way of appearing more picturesque when it is in the past; at that moment we felt awfully, and things got worse instead of better.

During the voyage down the coast we had remarked how calm was the Pacific Ocean, not a ripple on its surface, as quiet as a millpond, but we now discovered that to look down upon the sea from the passenger deck of a big steamer, and to rest on its bosom are two different things.

Hardly had we cleared the pier when the San Pedro began to rise and fall, and as we got out toward the open sea, the lifting and dropping sensation grew more marked.

We were on the great Pacific swell, and we didn't like it. The sloop with her mainsail and jib set did not pitch or roll; that was entirely unnecessary to accomplish its purpose, and as the sun rose over the mountains I looked upon my beautiful Nellie, and her little face was green.

In half an hour all of us, with the exception of MacQuaid and the captain and crew were, hopelessly seasick. Rupert and myself were just as sick as the poor girls, and very much more ashamed of ourselves.

Instead of bothering about whether the Caspian would stop for us, I hoped the sloop would sink so that Nellie and I could die together, while the poor youngster kept looking at me piteously, as though she

thought I could help her, and saying over and over:

"My Frederico, I feel so bad. I think I am going to die."

Everybody knows what seasickness is like; it is funny only when some one else is suffering, and you will excuse me if I draw a curtain over the next eight or ten hours. They tell me that on a calm day the swell of the Pacific equals five or six feet, sometimes more, with no waves breaking the surface of the oily ocean.

Schwab recovered first, and reminded us that the minister was on the cards to perform a couple of marriage ceremonies.

"Some other time," I groaned. "Don't you see we are all dying?"

"Snap out of it," he ordered. "Do you want to lose your chance? That smoke to the south is the Caspian coming up; she'll sight us in twenty minutes."

I struggled to my feet, and found the minister sitting in a boat with his head in his hands; when he lifted his face I saw that he had become sick, like the rest of us.

"The marriage ceremony, Mac," I said.

"Oh, don't ask me. I'm not a well man."

"We'll be on board the Caspian in an hour. You've got to do your job."

"Well, all come over here," he moaned.

The girls were lying on the deck under an awning made out of an old sail. I pointed to them, and told him he ought to be ashamed of himself; so he struggled out of the boat, and staggered over.

There may have been stranger marriages than this double wedding with both couples, the two witnesses, and the clergyman hardly able to lift their heads; but you can't prove it.

The girls betrayed little interest, Violet refused to sign her name until I spoke to her in her own language, and after we were married the four most intimately concerned flopped back on the deck.

Neither Rupert nor myself had forethought to secure wedding rings, and things were at an impasse when Violet said indifferently: "Open my hand bag, and pick out a couple of rings. You can give them back when we get on the steamer."

I looked into the bag, and found it blazing with diamonds and rubies, and the plainest rings we could find had several precious stones in them.

"It's terrible how Natchez treated you," I commented.

"Aw, shut up," replied poor Violet, too feeble to engage in an argument.

And so we were married.

Meanwhile we could make out the funnel of the Caspian, and then came a struggle with the skipper who refused to fly a signal of distress until the ever-ready Rupert gave him a hundred dollars.

In ten minutes more the Caspian was close by, and then I lost consciousness of my illness while I wondered if Ralston would be brutal enough to double cross us, since I had paid him in advance. Rupert was alarmed, too, and we sat silent, embracing our poor sick little brides, who snuggled against us, and didn't care if they got on board the steamer, or went to the bottom.

But the Caspian had stopped her engines, and slid slowly toward us, her momentum causing her to drift past, a hundred yards away. We saw a boat being swung out, and a boat's crew climbing into it and, with a sense of relief, understood that Ralston was playing fair.

"What's the trouble?" Ralston shouted through a megaphone.

Schwab cupped his hands and bellowed:

"Vessel in distress, passengers want to be taken off."

"Take the passengers off that sloop," Ralston sung out to the officer in charge of his boat which had just hit the water, and at the sight of the big steady-looking steamer, the three girls perked up, and the Indian nurse crawled out of some corner where she had been quietly miserable.

We saw a dozen passengers lining the rail of the steamer to watch the exciting incident, and in a couple of minutes the big lifeboat from the Caspian, with six sailors at the oars and an officer in the stern sheets, ran alongside of us.

"Is this craft sinking?" he demanded.

"No, but we want to board the Caspian," replied Schwab. "We ran out of Ecambo to intercept you."

"We're bound for Panama," the sailor warned him.

"And this party wants to go there."

I picked up Nellie, and carried her on board the boat, while Rupert did the same office for Dolores. Mac aided Violet and Schwab lifted the Indian nurse over the side; and Schwab tossed our bags after us.

"Good luck to you," he said with a wave of his hand when we were all in the boat. "Congratulations and best wishes for a long and happy life."

He was a darn good fellow, that Schwab.

There is so much to the mental attitude in seasickness that we all got well during the few minutes' ride to the steamer, and the girls were able to mount the accommodation ladder after they had been passed up to the quartermaster at the foot of it.

We had a chance to observe the swell of the ocean when we tried to reach the ladder; for the boat would be even with the step at one moment, and drop five or six feet the next.

Ralston, who pretended not to know us, stood on deck when we came off the ladder, and, in the hearing of the passengers, demanded to know who we were, and why we boarded him in that manner.

"Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hilton of New York City," I said with a thrill at my first use of the name of Mrs. Hilton, "Mr. and Mrs. Rupert Grew, New York, native servant, Miss Violet Larue of New York, and Rev. Colin MacQuaid of Boston. We came out of a small port near here, and want to take passage."

"You had no right to use a distress signal," he scolded, "but since you are on board, I'll carry you with me. Steward!"

A white-robed steward hustled forward.

"Prepare staterooms for these people," he commanded. Then he swung about, and climbed the ladder to the bridge; for the ship was already under way, and the boat had been lifted up to its place on the top deck. I had to admire the gentleman.

Violet was regarding the skipper with astonishment and indignation; for he had not paid her the slightest attention, when she confidently expected him to drop on one knee at her feet, or at least draw her into a fond embrace.

"Well," she exclaimed, "of all the cold propositions!" Then she followed the steward like the rest of us.

In the corridor, Nellie plucked my sleeve, and looked at me appealingly.

"Please, Frederico," she said, her embarrassment being overwhelming, "until we are married in a church—"

"Of course, darling," I assured her. "You and Dolores room together. I know how you feel about that funny ceremony."

Her thanks were written in her eyes, then she rubbed her red gold head against my shoulder.

"You poor little scared kids!" I said with a lump in my throat.

Ahead I saw Dolores having a confab undoubtedly on the same subject with the same result.

They gave us two staterooms on the same corridor, which made the arrangement most simple, and we left the youngsters to freshen themselves up after their harrowing experiences on the sloop, while Rupert and myself repaired to the smokeroom. Seated at a corner table, we looked at each other contentedly.

"I can't believe it," I observed.

"It's so," he said, with a happy smile. "We put it over. It's the strangest, most impossible thing in the world, but it has happened. Hilton, we're a couple of married men."

"In name only," I countered.

"That's only a matter of days. I'm the happiest man in the world."

"You're not. I am."

As the argument was about to get hot, the smokeroom steward whispered that the captain wished to see us in his cabin, which caused us to make haste forward. The astute skipper had a bottle of Scotch on his table, and after introduction to Rupert invited us to sit with him.

"You had your trained minister perform the ceremony," he questioned.

"Yes," said Rupert. "Here is my marriage certificate to prove it."

"Then I don't think you need worry. You and your wives are Americans, this is a British ship, and we are out of Peruvian jurisdiction."

"We certainly are grateful to you, sir. When we get to Panama, we'll have another

wedding to satisfy the girls' religious scruples. Until then they occupy a stateroom together."

CHAPTER XXXII.

DISASTER.

RALSTON shook hands with us again. "It's a pleasure to meet you two chaps," he declared. "The blond young lady, however, is not out of danger. I accept her as a passenger because she claims to be an American, but if her husband claims her before she disembarks at Panama, I'll have to carry her back."

"Let's hope he doesn't," I said warmly. Because it would have been a shame if poor Violet was dragged home again after her seasickness and everything.

We were lifting our glasses when there suddenly came the most appalling racket it is possible to imagine. The ship shook and shivered, while the rattle and jangle and crash of metal below us sounded like a boilershop amplified a hundred-fold.

Ralston leaped to his feet, and grasped a speaking tube. The smashing and banging continued for a moment, then all was silent, and the steady throb of the engines ceased.

"Hello," said Ralston coolly through the speaking tube. We gazed at him tensely, while he listened to a report from the chief engineer.

"I'll be right down," he said. "Excuse me, gentlemen. Don't disturb yourselves; finish your drinks. I've got to go below to the engine room."

"For heaven's sake, what's happened?" demanded Rupert.

"The shaft is broken." With this he rushed out of the cabin.

"What the deuce is the shaft?" I demanded. I never did know anything about machinery.

"The engines are in the middle of the ship," explained Rupert. "They apply their power to a steel shaft a couple of hundred feet long which runs to the stern, and to which the propeller is attached. "If it is broken, the ship is disabled."

"Yes, I've heard of that. But she can go along on the other propeller," I said nervously.

"This is an old ship; undoubtedly she has only one screw. If it's really broken, and it certainly sounds like it, we won't move from this spot until we get a tow."

"Oh," I said numbly. "That's too bad." And suddenly what it meant to us was brought home to me.

"Rupert," I exclaimed, "they can't get a tug from anywhere except Lima. They'll tow us back to Lima."

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"But Montez and Natchez?"

"They can't do anything to us; we're married, and on a British ship."

"I wonder. Better go to the girls. That racket will scare them out of their wits."

Accordingly we wended our way to the staterooms, and found the children white-faced and alarmed, hugging each other, for they were sure the ship was going to sink. Consoling them was a pleasant occupation.

Going on deck an hour later, we encountered the captain, who looked very grave, and asked us to return to his cabin.

"I have wirelessed Callao, and tugs are on the way," he said. "We are about sixty miles north of Callao, which means that the tugs will reach us in six hours. It's a clean break on the shaft, but fortunately we did not lose the propeller."

"Very fortunate," I mumbled. "How long will you be laid up?"

"At least a week, maybe longer. Of course, the passengers will have to go ashore, and wait for the next steamer."

I swallowed hard, and Rupert found his voice first.

"You said we were safe," he quavered. "But must we go ashore? We may need the protection of the British flag."

"It is not much protection in port," he informed us. "We are subject to the regulations of Peru while in her harbors, and you will have to go ashore. I am very sorry, because I fear you are in a serious situation."

"I'll tell the world we are," I muttered. "Montez will carve our hearts out."

"My advice is to send a wireless to the American minister claiming his protection

for you and your wives. Your marriage at sea is all right so far as I am concerned, but it is very probable that the Peruvian authorities will question the legality of it and, as you are on their soil, and the girls were Peruvian subjects, and I take it you had not the consent of parents or guardians, it's a very pretty question."

"Beautiful!" I groaned.

"I would transship you at sea," said the captain sympathetically, "except that the only vessel which may pass within the next ten hours will be a Peruvian liner."

"The American minister is our only hope," said Rupert. "I wish I had cultivated his acquaintance when I was in Lima. It's a pretty slim hope if Montez is on the dock, and grabs the girls when we go ashore."

"You'll excuse me now," said Ralston. "I felt it my duty to acquaint you with the facts, and I deeply regret my inability to assist you further."

"For thirty years this rotten old tub has been afloat," Rupert said bitterly as we left the captain's quarters, "and she waited until this unlucky day to break her crank shaft. My Lord, Fred, I can't lose Dolores now!"

"You don't feel any worse than I do. Get up that letter to the American minister, but be careful how you word it, because it will pass through government hands, and that means Montez."

"What can I say?" he implored.

"'Most important you meet Caspian at Callao. Shall greatly appreciate seeing you immediately upon landing,' signed 'Rupert Grew.' With all the publicity you have been getting, he won't risk offending you. All diplomats used to be politicians. In that way, you don't show your hand."

We got off the wireless, and then went to seek the girls whom we found to have recovered their spirits, made careful toilets, and appeared on deck, accompanied by Violet, who looked worried. MacQuaid was buzzing around the young women in good spirits, and apparently without a care. Of course, they did not know what we knew, but Violet had a hunch.

"What's going to happen?" she asked me in a low tone.

"We will float around here for five or six hours; then tugs will tow us back to Callao, where we arrive some time to-morrow morning." I grieved for Violet then; she turned deadly pale, and an expression of mortal terror was written on her face.

"Don't let me fall into my husband's hands. He'll kill me!" she whispered.

"And he'll kill me, too, if Montez doesn't beat him to it," I said glumly. "I don't know what on earth to do. We have wirelessed the American minister to protect us and our wives, but that won't help you any. I'm not so sure it will do us any good either."

Violet's lips were quivering; suddenly she turned, and ran down to her stateroom. It occurred to me then that she stood an excellent chance of being murdered; for she had not only fled from her husband, but taken the family jewels with her.

However, there were two men with swords out for me, and I wouldn't be surprised if Señora Escamona was waiting on the pier with her poniard ready. I had an engagement for dinner with her to-night. I would not show up and she took offense so easily.

"Are we going back?" asked Nellie who had edged close to listen to my confidential remarks to Violet.

"Yes, dear. I'm afraid so."

"Well," she said. "I do not fear my uncle. I am a married woman now."

"You are a heroine," I said enthusiastically. "Rupert has wired the American minister to be on the job to protect our wives; so you and Dolores must not be alarmed."

"Can father take us away from you, Rupert?" wailed Dolores.

"You bet he can't," declared Rupert stoutly. I hoped he was right.

"Aweel," said MacQuaid stoutly. "Call on me to testify that you are properly wedded. Though it's a great misfortune that we are returning."

"You said it, parson." Privately, I thought he might have a chance to read the burial service over Rupert and myself, but I managed to keep my thought unspoken.

We dined shortly afterward, but none of

us had an appetite. Violet did not appear at all, and I began to wonder if she would try to commit suicide, but decided she didn't have that kind of constitution.

On the contrary, she had shut herself up in her stateroom with liquid refreshments, and got herself into a state where she didn't care what happened and, although I do not believe in taking too much to drink, it wouldn't have done Rupert and myself any harm upon that occasion, for neither of us slept a wink; instead we discussed our predicament until sunrise, and then went on deck.

Two tugs were dragging us along at about five knots an hour and we were close inshore, though the port of Callao was not yet in sight. About breakfast time we saw it far off, and when we all went on deck afterward, we were coming into the harbor.

In front of our wives, we tried to keep stiff upper lips, but our hearts sank lower with every puff of the industrious tugs. Presently Captain Ralston walked by our deck chairs and, seeing me, he made a sign for me to follow him which I proceeded to do, wondering if he had any more bad news to impart. He had.

"Late last night," he said soberly, "I received a wireless from the company's agent asking if any persons were passengers who were not on the passenger list, and I was compelled to send your names."

"Which makes you accessory before the fact to a double murder," I told him dourly.

"If you summoned your minister from Lima, he may be able to pull you out of your difficulty," he said soothingly. "You realize that I had to protect myself."

"I hope you choke on your own crank shaft," I told him savagely, and walked away from him. Of course, the message was inspired by Montez and Natchez who had missed their ladies, probably located the automobile in the garage at Callao, and assumed we had succeeded in boarding the Caspian, as she was the only passenger craft departing for the North. Now that they knew for certain we were on board, we could count upon a reception committee on the pier.

However, I was wrong; the chairman of the reception committee boarded the ship from the tender the moment we dropped anchor.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE OPTION.

RUPERT and I saw him simultaneously, and I supposed my friend had the same craven impulse as myself. If I hadn't known that Callao harbor is convention headquarters for sharks I might have dived over the side of the vessel, and of course I had to stand by Nellie.

Rupert was as white as chalk, and I presume I was not ruddy, and the poor girls, upon seeing their relative, began to whimper with fear.

Montez came directly toward us, and whatever might have been his inward emotions he deserved credit for his unruffled bearing. He bowed distantly to us all, taking in the group with a lightning glance.

"Captain Ralston has offered me his cabin for a conference with you two gentlemen," he said in his usual suave manner. "The ladies had better remain where they are."

Not a word to his trembling daughter or his equally terrified niece, but he looked expectantly at Rupert.

"Very well," said Rupert boldly. "Our wives will excuse us, I am sure."

Montez followed the steward, who conducted the party, while I followed, and Rupert brought up the rear. I felt like a criminal on his way to the gallows; at least, if a criminal upon such an occasion feels the way I did, I want capital punishment abolished.

Once in the cabin, Montez seated himself, and motioned to us to take chairs.

"Señor Grew," he said sternly. "You have abused my hospitality outrageously, made a poor return for my kindness, proved that you are a dishonorable man, and I do not wish any further dealings with you."

"I am afraid I don't understand what you mean by further dealings."

"I regret I cannot do business with you. I have the honor to return your check for five thousand dollars, and ask you to give

me back the option upon the lands at Tequilla."

"I am sorry I cannot do business with you," said Rupert calmly. "However, the matter of the option is a closed deal, and I cannot reopen it."

"You must!" exclaimed Montez, beginning to show excitement.

"I regret that I was compelled to elope with your daughter," Rupert continued. "I would have preferred to marry her openly, but I knew you would refuse your consent. I am legally married to Dolores; she is now an American citizen, and we hope some day to obtain your forgiveness."

"Don't tell me such things," said Montez angrily. "You cannot be married. No priest would marry you."

"We were married upon the high seas, in the presence of two reputable witnesses, by the Rev. Colin MacQuaid, an ordained minister who is on board this ship, and will gladly testify."

"You are in Peruvian waters. I shall take my daughter and niece ashore, and our courts will declare there was no marriage."

"I have claimed the protection of the American minister for myself and wife, and also for Mr. Hilton and his wife."

"There are other ways," said Montez significantly. "You can be sent to jail in my country for abduction for a long term."

"I have some influence in Washington, and I am not afraid of your courts," Rupert said defiantly. He was handling things so well that I knew better than to thrust in my oar, and I listened to the verbal duel with bated breath.

"We shall permit the courts to decide," said Montez. "I offer you ten thousand dollars for your option."

"No," said Rupert. "I stick to the deal. I propose to purchase the property before the option expires."

Montez's eyes flashed dangerously. "Twenty thousand dollars," he exclaimed. Then Rupert threw back his head, and laughed.

"My esteemed father-in-law," he said, "if you dislike to do business with me I shall withdraw from the syndicate I represent, but we want that land, and we intend to get it."

"Look here, Rupert," I interposed, considering that he was injuring our case by angering the Peruvian.

"Shut up!" he snapped.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, father," he said, returning to Montez. "If you consent to accept me as your son-in-law, and Hilton as your nephew, I'll take my check for five thousand dollars and tear up the option. Otherwise I hold on to the most valuable oil lands I have seen in my experience as a mining engineer."

Ramon Montez gazed at him fascinated; then he deflated like a balloon tire that has stepped on a railroad spike.

"You knew!" he gasped.

"The surface indications were unmistakable. How did you find out?"

Montez laughed shortly. "We received a tremendous offer from an English oil syndicate yesterday. Accept my apologies, Señor Grew. I supposed you were a fool."

"And because you had no hesitation in trimming a fool," declared Rupert, "I had no scruples about carrying off the girl I love. Come, father, do you forgive us?"

Montez shrugged his shoulders, then smiled reluctantly.

"We should do well in business together, Rupert," he declared. "I would have wished my daughter to marry one of her countrymen and a member of her own church, but since she has compromised herself, and you turn out to be in possession of a Golconda of oil, perhaps it is something to be accepted graciously. As regards Señor Hilton and my niece, that is another thing."

"Hilton is my partner in the oil deal, and if you accept me you must accept him."

Montez regarded me not too pleasantly. "Doubtless you know, señor, that my niece is an heiress," he said.

"Uncle," I assured him, "I am willing to accept your statement of her estate unaudited. I am crazy about Nellie, and I must be to take a chance like that."

"Well," said Montez, "let us all shake hands."

"Señor," I said a bit nervously, "I rather expected to find Señor Natchez in your company this morning."

"Yes," he said with a curious smile. "I

presume his wife is on board also. It happens, however, that Señor Natchez sailed for Chili yesterday morning with a lady."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"His business affairs were in great disorder, and he was the victim of a sudden fascination for a person of your acquaintance, the Señora Escamona."

"Glory hallelujah!" I exclaimed. "Wait till I tell poor Violet."

Afterward I chided Rupert for not telling me he suspected oil when he took an option upon the real estate development, thus permitting MacQuaid and myself to ride him unjustly.

"You fellows were enjoying yourself so much I let you have your fun," he explained. "As a matter of fact, you can't tell much from surface indications, but I knew I could sell my option in New York to people who would find out positively before the option ran out.

"On land which looked exactly like that terrain they have found vast quantities of oil right in the city limits of Los Angeles, and the people who sold it at what they thought high prices for home sites have never recovered.

"I had forgotten all about the option until Montez made the break of offering me ten thousand for land which he had supposed was worthless when he sold it to me a couple of days before, and that proved that he had discovered its value since, a very lucky turn for us, as otherwise I am afraid we would have lost the girls, and seen the inside of a jail."

When we all went ashore we found the American minister, who was glad to know his services were not required. Violet went brazenly back to her home, and lorded it over her mother-in-law until the Caspian was ready to sail again, while Montez, after he had made a fresh deal with Rupert, by which we got a piece of the profit, sold the land to the English syndicate for a million. Rupert made Rev. Colin MacQuaid an attractive present; he doesn't need to lecture any more.

After Montez had made all the deductions in Nellie's estate he could think of, he handed her over three hundred thousand dollars, and then Rupert and I sailed, with our wives, for New York upon our real honeymoon.

If you have visited the theater in New York or attended a gay restaurant, during the last few years, most likely you have noticed two ravishingly beautiful and exotic young ladies attended by two prosperous and contented appearing men. In that case you have probably seen Nellie and Dolores, and Rupert and me. Gentlemen and ladies, I thank you.

THE END

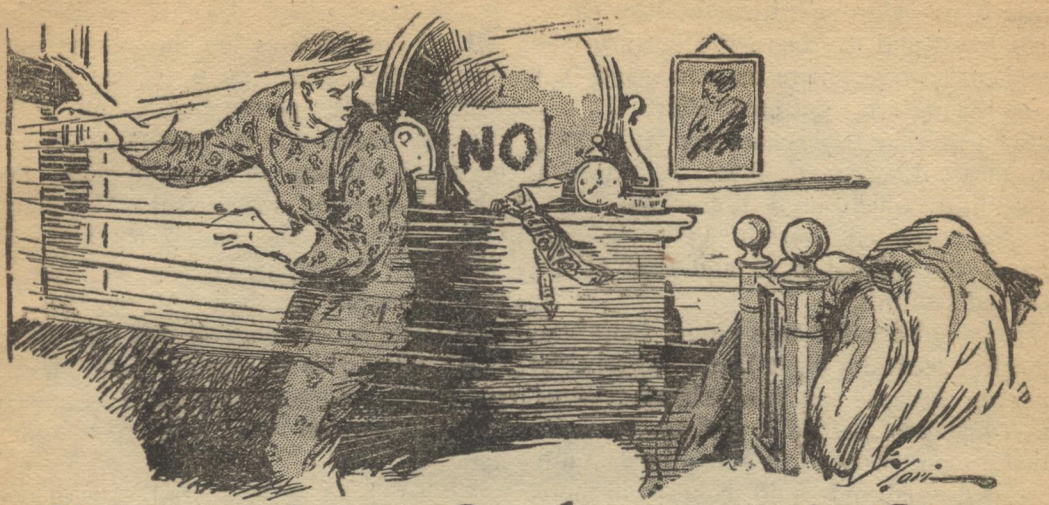
THE SUBLIMEST COURAGE

ALONG with other humankind I fawn upon the great
Who won their fight and took their prize and hence may smile at Fate.
But mainly on my altar stones there burns the hottest fire
To the licked who go on living—they're the ones I most admire!

There'll be no lack of glory or of sycophantic praise
For those who wear the victors' crowns of laurels and of bays.
And so my bit should not be missed were I to turn aside
To greet the plucky fellow who, defeated, kept his pride.

The world's supremest courage isn't always shown in fight—
The rarest sort is needed when the loser's end's in sight,
The vanquished still is victor if his grit outlive his fall—
The whipped who go on whistling are the bravest of them all!

Strickland Gillilan.



Follow Your Noes

By WALTER A. SINCLAIR

STRUGGLING out of the dream which held him, Barton Pyne muttered, "Yeh—" and then, at that sound, he sat bolt upright, barking: "No!"

Which was a most negative way to start a day. It was the last word in negativeness—also the first. Hence it brought him up cross and looking for trouble.

Grumpily he wriggled out of bed and touched an experimental foot to the chilly hardwood floor. A little invisible imp whispered to him to crawl back and doze for another quarter hour and, if necessary, pass up the cold shower.

It was a frigid morning, and this house, with its antique heating plant, never did get warm before noon. It would be cozy in bed, the imp whispered.

Barton hesitated.

"No!" he repeated right out loud, and leaped over the wood to the gelid rug. It slid underfoot, and nearly upset him.

Pyne struggled sleepily to regain his equilibrium, and then turned toward the open window through which the frozen zephyrs were pouring straight from the north pole.

He made a move to close the window, but was held rooted to his rug island at sight of a sheet of paper pinned to his dresser. On its white surface was penciled in big, black printed letters the word "No."

That was enough. It reminded him of his resolve. Byrd and Amundsen hadn't pulled down any window to shut out polar blasts—and see how they had triumphed!

For the nonce—and he had only the vaguest idea of how long a full-length nonce was—he would endure. At least, while he did his setting-up exercises in place of his daily dozin'.

He did them.

Puffing and glowing, he completed his contortions before striding to the window and pushing it down. He did this with a deliberate gesture, pausing to inhale a few more lung-searching drafts of that icy ozone which now made his whole body tingle. Yes, and his spirit, too. That felt stimulated and strengthened.

As Barton donned his bathrobe he coldly regarded the sheet of paper and then the face in the mirror.

Right now it was a determined young countenance, rather good-looking, especial-

ly as it was glowing with a healthy color. That scowl and the aggressive outthrust of the jaw, however, were assumed, and had to be maintained by a great effort.

Each time he let his face slip it dropped into pleasant, easygoing lines. A face with possibilities which needed exercise.

"No," quoted Barton Pyne, glaring first at the printed word and then at his reflected features.

He pounded a fist on a palm. Somehow the effect seemed a bit ludicrous. Probably this was because his fair hair was sleep-tousled and he needed a shave. Bart decided to postpone further rehearsals until he was dressed and could make them more impressive.

Crumpling the paper into a ball, he hurled it contemptuously into a waste-basket. It had served its purpose as a reminder. He had printed the word out in hot anger before going to bed and had left it there to set the day's key for him.

The preceding night had been a bitter one. His self-esteem had cracked up at a high altitude and had smashed before he could jump. He had asked Doris Vale to marry him, and she had said "No."

"If only as an example to you," she explained with cruel kindness. "It's a word you haven't got in your bright lexicon."

"Why, what's the matter with me?" Bart managed to gasp, after partly recovering from the shock. "I thought you liked me."

"I do like you, Bart," she answered, her glorious brown eyes caressing him warmly. "I more than like you. But I'll never marry you as you are. You're a lovable chap, honest and clean, I know. Honest with every one but yourself. I'm talking about your prospects."

"I get enough for a man of my sort to marry on," expostulated Bart uneasily. "I'm assistant to the president."

"You're a glorified yes-man," Doris told him. She felt that she had to work herself up to indignation, or she would be in danger of yielding to Bart. For he was a lovable chap. "And not so glorified, either," she added.

"A yes-man?" flared Barton indignantly.

"Exactly," snapped Doris, steeling herself. "You got this job through an introduction that gave you a chance to show your agreeable personality. And in the year or more you've been there you've never shown any disagreeable side, even when disagreeing was needed. You simply 'Yes' Mr. Booler and keep him self-satisfied. You aren't his secretary—he has a stenographer for that. All you do is sit there handily for him to ask you if you don't think this or that idea of his is a good one. And you say yes. If he asserted that to-morrow was yes-terday, you'd agree."

"There's no sense quarreling with one's bread and butter," muttered Pyne unhappily. "Mr. Booler usually is right."

"Usually," repeated Doris ironically. "But he's not infallible. Hasn't he ever asked you to admire a scheme you didn't approve of?"

"Ye—" began Bart, honestly, and then nearly bit off his tongue to check the hateful word. "Possibly. He's more experienced than I am, and has a record for success to give weight to his opinion."

"But he asked you for *your* opinion—and you yessed him!" rejoined Doris bitterly. "Suppose Booler drops out or dies or retires or is retired—where will you be? You haven't done anything there to make a record for doing anything except saying yes to him."

"I could get something else," asserted Barton stiffly. "I have ability, or I would not have got this place."

"That's just it—you *have* ability," Doris agreed heartily. "At least, you had. But you're not using it, and every day you leave it idle you lose just that much of it. And—don't interrupt, please—this yes-habit is affecting your whole life outside the office as well as in. You let every one impose on you—touchers, loafers, everybody who can take advantage of your easy nature. You agree with every one in order to avoid responsibility. Remember, yes-men say yes, but you'll note bosses say no."

"What do you expect me to do?" snapped Pyne. "Go quarreling through life—disagreeing with every one?"

"If you ought to disagree—yes," she replied, and smiled ruefully as she uttered that affirmative. "Have opinions to offer when asked for them. Stand by them if you think you're right. All the great men of history had opinions, and were willing to suffer, to die if necessary, for them. Some did die, and they were the very greatest.

"I'm not asking you to do that—you wouldn't be called on to do so. But I would like to see you have some backbone, to stand up and say no when you think no. Only, you haven't that word in your vocabulary. You just couldn't say no."

"You think so?" he demanded bitterly. Doris nodded. "Well, I can. I can use a no or leave it alone. But why should I? It would only be agreeing with you—yessing you on something that I—"

His words trickled to a confused halt, stopped by a thought.

Doris smiled triumphantly and finished the sentence:

"Something that you know you ought to do, but haven't the strength of character to try. Barton, I wouldn't waste my efforts on you if I didn't think you had it in you to make good—and if I didn't care a lot. I'm not asking you to say no when you think yes. If you only would try for one day, even!"

"I'll show you," burst out Pyne, hurt and indignant. "For one day—to-morrow—I'll 'No' everything."

"Including your opinions," Doris added with a smile. "That is, if you intend to report to me to-morrow night."

"Why should I, after the way you've razzed me?" snarled Bart.

He cared for her tremendously, or he wouldn't have made that rash promise. Now, when he felt that he had lost her, and when she had told her unshellacked opinion of him, he didn't care what happened to him.

"When I do this, I'm doing it because *I* want to—not to suit any one else," he went on. "I'll show whether or not I can say no. I'll tell the aye-ayed world!"

"Don't do it indiscriminately," begged Doris with a sudden mixture of pride and fright, such as Frankenstein must have felt when his monster began to click. "Promise, won't you?"

"No!" shouted Bart, grabbing his hat and bolting for the door, leaving Doris gasping after him, impressed for the moment at least.

That was last night. To-day was The Day.

Feeling that he had started well, he stalked to the bathroom. He was closing its door, when Pauline Tuttle hastily started out of her room and then carefully emitted an unmistakable gasp of disappointment.

Wrapping her mandarin robe around her as revealingly as a street coat, she turned a heavily charged gaze upon Bart and inquired confidently:

"Let me be first, Mr. Pyne? I have an early date with a hairdresser—and I know you always are willing to accommodate."

That final phrase was unfortunate. It recalled him to his resolve. Polly had an easy job in the financial district, where she didn't have to report until ten. She had an hour more than he to get to work.

"I have an early appointment," replied Pyne. "No."

And he shut the door in the indignant girl's face.

He tried to make up for any seeming rudeness by rushing through shower and shave in record time. Hence he nicked his chin a few times, necessitating use of smarting caustic pencil to vulcanize the punctures. Presently, arrayed and in his turn-to-the-right mind, he nodded at the serious face in the mirror and strode downstairs, pausing at the door to exchange salutations with his landlady.

Being a person of meager conversational resources, she tried to conceal the fact by offering her daily bromide.

"It's going to be a nice day," she predicted. "Don't you think?"

Bart glanced at the graying sky, with its promise of a slushy snow flurry about the time workers went out to lunch. There hardly seemed to be any principle involved to require his standing up for his opinions about the weather, but he resolutely answered:

"No."

"Humph!" muttered the landlady, stiffening angrily. "By the way, Mr. Pyne, a gentleman was here yesterday looking at rooms, and he offered me ten dollars a month more than you're paying for yours. I said that you had had it so long that rather than give it up you'd probably prefer to meet his offer. Wouldn't you?"

"No," retorted Bart, striding out.

He was paying all he felt the room was worth. Probably, if he hadn't disagreed with her, she would have turned down the other offer because of Bart's long tenancy. Sighing over the sacrifices made in sticking to one's word—a short word—Pyne hurried to the subway station. A train was sliding in—his train.

At every turnstile stood a queue of three or four nickel-pushers waiting to dash in. Bart had taken his place, and had estimated he just could make the train, entering at average speed, when a breath-taking vision in furs, silks and cosmetics ingratiatingly tried to push into line ahead of him. Bart stood fast.

"I'm in a hurry," the vision condescended to explain in a manner of one accustomed to having her way. "You'll let me go ahead."

Something about the way she stated it as a fact rubbed Pyne's fur the wrong way. Grunting "No" quite fiercely, he lunged ahead before the silken peril could crowd in front.

She gave him such a contemptuous glare that he became confused and tried to pass through the turnstile without dropping a nickel in the slot. This brought him to a halt long enough to pile up a line of sarcastic humans.

Before he could make the necessary deposit the train pulled out. Net gain for being firm—o.

Arriving finally in the ground floor vestibule of his office building, Bart ordered his favorite cigarette at the little stand tucked in a niche in the lobby. The proprietor searched his small stock at a glance. With an assured air he turned round and announced:

"All out of 'em, but these 'Lord Mixtures' are just as good. Same stuff, in fact. O. K. by you?"

"No," snorted Bart, waving aside the proffered substitute.

He was no brand fusser, but now he was beginning to notice the growing number of times his acquiescence was taken for granted. He turned away.

"Hey! One second," implored the cigar-stand man, digging behind his counter. He exhumed from hiding a pack of the requested brand, explaining:

"I was keeping 'em for a bird what gets 'em every day."

"So do I, so why the favoritism?" demanded Barton loftily.

He wanted to tell the man to keep his cigarettes for the favored bird, but what was the use? He had won his point.

He bought them and hurried to the elevator. That moment's delay had been enough to make him an instant too late in reaching the doors before the operator started to close them.

"Take the next car," he chanted.

"No," roared Bart, who had tasted blood, and now yearned for more worlds to conquer.

He thrust himself sidewise between the closing doors, and forced the operator to wait until he had wriggled into the car. The man glowered in silent resentment all the way to Pyne's floor. Why, this mild chap never had objected before when the door was closed in his face!

Exhilarated by this second success, Bart entered the large suite of the Booler Digit Company, stepping high. He was a worm who had become a centipede with hob-nailed shoes on all feet. He felt his will growing—maybe it was adding a few codicils.

His chest expanded, seriously endangering a button which was sewn on rather casually. He'd show Doris Vale if he didn't have any will of his own.

At this high moment, just after he had hung up hat and topcoat, Bart felt a touch, and realized, upon turning, that another was following him. Farlow, office gossip and borrower, beamed upon him confidently.

"How's the old ray of sunshine this morning?" he prefaced. Lowering his voice he added swiftly: "Listen, Bart, I

had to take a gal to a night club last eve—place where they have a cover charge and no cover; at least, none on the chorus. It vacuum-cleaned my roll. Be a good guy and slip me a finniff until pay-day."

"No," exploded Bart, suddenly halting his involuntary reach for his pocket—a gesture which he made mechanically when Farlow approached. "Zero doing. You've been owing me ten dollars for over a month now."

"Arrh! If you're gonna be a tightwad about it," snarled Farlow, dazed by this unexpected firmness. He stared angrily at the newly determined Pyne. "I'll give you your old ten this week."

"See that you do," retorted Bart, delighted at the bare idea of retrieving a loan concerning which the borrower had mentioned exactly nothing previously. This "No" habit was saving him money—and maybe getting him back some which he had considered lost forever.

Farlow was a voluble gossip, whose swivel tongue could spread trouble for any one who displeased him. This kept his office creditors terrorized, and right now he gave Pyne a look which badly needed laundering.

Pyne was unconscious of this, happy in his newly found powers of denial. For an hour he was busy looking over papers on his desk. Then he heard the door in the next office slam.

Restraining his first impulse to run in and fawn upon his chief, he waited until summoned. In the big private office Orville Booler stood beside a window thrusting out his chest at practically the entire known universe. He turned breezily upon his minion.

"Morning, Pyne," he boomed heartily, and smacked his hands together. "I feel like a two-year-old this morning. Been getting a bit—ah—girthy, so to-day I tied into some high-priced exercises. Just put the old pep into me. No use of my looking old ahead of time. I bet right now I look about—say, thirty-five, don't I?"

Thus appealed to, Bart stared appraisingly at Mr. Booler, who was fifty-five and looked it or more. Long years of gazing upon the fleshpots of Egypt and points west had hung on Mr. Booler a plethora of chins and dewlaps and puffy eyelids.

His face had plenty of color—particularly his nose—but this ruddiness was not that of youthful health, and it had a decided tendency to purple.

Barton shifted uneasily, and then blurted out:

"No."

"No what?" snapped Orville Booler, suddenly turning off his morning burst of geniality and favoring his hireling with a glare.

"No, sir," amended Bart civilly.

Booler grunted. This wasn't the "what" he meant, but he decided not to pursue the matter to further unpleasant franknesses. The office's mean temperature was meaner, if anything, as the president gruffly ordered Bart to take and study the extra set of proof sheets lying on his desk.

"Our new advertising program," Mr. Booler announced coldly. "Go over it carefully for any blow-holes. After lunch, want your reactions; and I hope they're not too blamed no-ing."

Pyne was conscious of a strong tincture of irony in this last remark. Also it had all the sound of a veiled hint, even a threat.

Retiring to his modest office, he studied the proof sheets carefully all forenoon, analyzing each line and making conscientious notes. These latter he reconsidered and condensed.

He was startled out of a deep study by the telephone bell. Over the wire came the voice of Doris Vale, who was secretary to a lawyer on the twentieth floor of this same building in which Bart worked.

The voice had a smile—almost a grin: "Hello, Crosspatch. Want to take me to lunch?"

Barton just barely prevented himself from blurting out an eager affirmative. He did want to—wanted to boast of his progress. Yet he also wished to spend most of the noon hour studying those advertisements.

Moreover, he had to teach this young person a lesson.

"No," he answered as firmly as he could without being rude.

"Well!" she gasped indignantly, and hung up without another word.

There was something bordering on consternation in the office when the president's jackal remained working, instead of going out with the boss. Pyne's strange conduct already had stirred up the force.

Farlow had been circulating a rumor that Bart was slated for the greased skids and was sulking in his tent. This report was given color by Pyne's engrossed manner when he dashed out for a sandwich along toward one o'clock. As a matter of fact, his mind was filled with the advertising matter concerning which he was to give his reactions.

About two o'clock Booler returned from luncheon, looking particularly chesty and accompanied by Pomeroy, the advertising manager.

They had been "in conference" from soup to apple pie, and were in rare accord. Shortly after Booler's return, his buzzer summoned Pyne to the slaughter.

Pausing only long enough to review his reactions, Bart squared his shoulders and marched in.

"Well, did you look over our new advertising program?" demanded Booler puffing luxuriously on a particular ripe colorado maduro presidente and looking brightly expectant at his yes-man. Bart nodded. "Now, be frank. That's why I asked for your reactions. It's pretty slick, hey?"

"No," stated Pyne, with a tremendous effort.

After all, what did it matter? If he couldn't convince Doris of his backbone, if he lost her, he did not wish to remain in a job which kept him in the same building with her.

He opened his mouth to elucidate his reasons for answering in the negative, but Booler was too quick for him. Jerking out his cigar before it dropped from his sagging lips, the boss roared:

"You don't? What's the matter with it?"

"To begin with, the whole tone of this copy is too frivolous, considering that you deal in a very serious commodity—"

"Get 'em smiling, good natured at first glance and they'll get interested and read the rest," interrupted Booler, stormily.

"True of many articles, but yours is sold to a very serious trade for a very solid purpose. Such is my reaction," declared Barton, stifling an impulse to say this last a bit self-deprecatingly.

Before Booler could inflate and erupt the angry comments he was preparing to launch, Pyne rushed on, tersely stating his ideas in detail, using the condensed, pointed sentences of one who had reduced his argument to the bone.

"May I ask a question?" demanded Pomeroy, when he had finished. The advertising manager's tones dripped venom. "Have you ever directed any advertising? for any one?"

"No," replied Pyne, truthfully and in character.

"Huh!" grunted Pomeroy, putting a tone of contempt into the wordless sound. "Are you after my job, maybe?"

"No," repeated Bart, growing more proficient each time.

"Possibly it might change your valuable opinion—" here Pomeroy fairly gloated in triumphant anticipation—"if you knew that this program was practically dictated by Mr. Booler himself, hey?"

Barton stood silent. There did not seem to be any call for his saying anything. And he was not sure he could trust his voice.

"Well, Pyne, how about it?" growled Booler, drawing down his bushy eyebrows at Bart. "Don't you think it's O. K.?"

"No," responded Bart, forcing his voice to be calm.

"Well, of all the upstart impertinence!" snorted the president, his royal purple rising threateningly. "Where did you get the idea you know more than I or Pomeroy, who specializes in this?"

"You told me to be frank," Bart reminded him evenly, courteously.

"I didn't ask you to be insulting," roared Booler. He waited for some sign of surrender. None showed. "Don't you know you were?"

"No," retorted Pyne. "I gave my reactions as requested."

"No. No. *No!*" mimicked Orville Booler, with rising rage. He waved his

vassal toward the door and at risk of apoplexy ordered: " Follow your ' noes ' out of here. I'll see you later."

Bart nodded and went out in a daze. That final shot had meant he was to remain, probably for another verbal assault-and-battery before being fired.

There was little doubt as to the final outcome. He had no-ed himself out of a comfortable berth where he had yessed so easily.

This " no " stuff could be overdone, Bart pondered. Well, anyway, he had done it, even if he had overdone it. He had proved his independence—its reward, liberty from a job, would come next.

Should he quit before he was fired, he asked himself?

Automatically came the answer: " No." Quitting would be an admission that he was wrong. And he felt that he had not acted wrongly.

His opinion might be wrong, though he did not concede this, but he had been asked for it and had given it. He was ready to suffer for it.

Long-established habit of thought raised a dying head to hiss that he merely had set himself against a paying boss in order to " yes " a petticoat boss who scorned him. Angrily, his newly-found personality retorted that he had spoken his own mind, for once.

After another half hour, Pomeroy stamped out, throwing a contemptuous glare at Bart as he went. Booler's door slammed behind him, and a minute later the president glowered out to announce that he was not to be disturbed " by any one " until he gave further notice.

He addressed this particularly at the girl who acted as switchboard operator and " information." As she nodded eagerly, Booler turned toward the open door of Pyne's office and added.

" Pyne, you see that that's enforced. You might as well do something around here, and this is right in your line, saying ' no.' "

The aggrieved official slammed his door again before Bart could choose a reply summed up in " no." The other office help under the leadership of Farlow, snickered derisively at the blunt reference to Pyne's unclassified job.

Bart drew up his jaw a few notches and in doing so, discovered that he had it jacked up rather tightly already. He stared calmly at the snickerers and they suddenly found that their work required full attention.

Another heavy, quiet half hour tiptoed into the past, with no sound from the inner lair of Orville Booler.

Then came a loud interruption. The switchboard girl was speaking persuasively, pleadingly. Finally she rang Barton's bell.

" Gentleman wishes to see Mr. Boller," the girl explained in an awed manner as she consulted the name she had written " Mr.—er—"

" I'm Anson Keely of Youngstown," announced the visitor, pushing through the swing gate in the rail. " One of your biggest customers, I believe. And I'm not used to being delayed. I want to see Orville Booler—now."

This newcomer was a pudgy, middle-aged man with straw-colored mustache, rather florid clothes, and an over-assertive manner. Bart thought him unnecessarily blatant in proclaiming his importance for a man of Anson Keely's rating. The fellow almost seemed to anticipate refusal, and to try to beat the refuser to the punch.

" Mr. Booler gave orders he is not to be disturbed for any reason just now," announced Pyne, trying to be polite yet firm.

" ' Orders?' If you expect any orders from me, you trot in and tell him Anson Keely must see him," blustered the stranger.

Bart smilingly shook his head.

" Well, aren't you going?"

" No," Pyne replied, still civilly. " Can you return later? Or leave a telephone number where we can call?"

" I wait for no one," stormed the man. " My business is with him *now*—or not at all. Are you going to let me see Booler? One side."

" No," stated Bart, looking searchingly into the pudgy man's angry green eyes.

They met his gaze aggressively, almost staring Pyne out of countenance. Then—Bart was almost sure they wavered. He added: " I am Mr. Booler's assistant. Is it something I can do for you?"

"No," mocked the visitor. Suddenly a crafty look lighted his eyes. Changing tone, he added: "Maybe you can. I came away rather unexpectedly, and now I find I need some money to entertain a few friends at dinner to-night. Can you cash my check for two hundred, say?"

"No," responded Bart, very promptly.

"I might have known! Dealing with underlings," sneered the stranger insultingly. "Show me to Mr. Booler."

"No. My orders are positive," asserted Pyne, placing himself in the man's path, calm and unyielding.

The visitor glared, then wavered before that unflinching gaze. Turning, he stormed out, announcing:

"I'm through. Hereafter, Vanderlyn gets my orders. This is the last you'll have of my trade. And you can tell Booler that, Mr. Nosey!"

As he vanished, Farlow jumped up and started toward the president's office, exclaiming excitedly:

"Look what you've done, Pyne! Driven away a big customer. I'm going in to tell Mr. Booler before it's too late. Stand aside."

"No. I don't take orders from you, Farlow," replied Bart, standing his ground.

Farlow hesitated an instant and then tried to dodge around Pyne. Bart seized the "touch" expert, who struggled and then struck wildly at the immovable young man.

Coming unexpectedly, the blow staggered Pyne against a chair which toppled over with a crash. In an instant Pyne recovered and delivered a wallop which sent Farlow sprawling.

Amid the hub-bub which accompanied this, Orville Booler made a personal appearance which was not a picture. In a voice which sounded like an indignant sea lion's, he demanded to know the meaning of this uproar.

"Mr. Keely—Anson Keely of Youngstown called, and Pyne wouldn't let him see you," howled Farlow from his dug-out under a desk. "I tried to tell you, and Pyne assaulted me—"

"Anson Keely?" moaned Booler, his purple rising. "What do you mean, Pyne, stopping a big customer like that? Dammit, man—"

"You ordered me not to let in any one," Bart reminded him. "He wanted you to cash a check—"

"Don't tell me what I said," roared Booler in a burst of unfairness. "When a man like that calls, use your head. Get out, both of you—Pyne and Farlow. You saw him. Maybe you can catch him at the sidewalk and invite him back. I've always wanted to meet him. You, Pyne, apologize."

"No," retorted Bart hotly. He was ready to junk his job there and then, but Booler was speechless with rage, merely waving his two employees to hurry after the affronted visitor.

Grabbing his hat, Bart sprinted to the elevator. Its cage was passing his floor, downbound, when he rapped peremptorily on the glass. The same operator he had stopped that morning was in charge, and with a happy wave at his well-filled car, he passed without stopping.

Something about Bart's expression must have made the man reconsider, for he stopped between floors and returned to take Pyne and Farlow aboard.

In spite of this slight gain, they failed to overtake the late visitor on the sidewalk. Farlow dashed away, presumably seeking him in the throng, but probably to escape Pyne. Bart took the opposite direction, hurrying for five blocks before he decided that this method was hopeless.

There seemed no need of returning to the office, so he gloomily started for his room. He walked a mile or so, thinking over the day's hectic developments.

Strangely enough, he realized suddenly he was walking with shoulders back, chest out, and chin up. He was being himself.

When he reached his lodgings his landlady was hovering in the hallway. Timidly she ventured:

"I hope you didn't take offense at what I said this morning, Mr. Pyne. After all, you've been here so long I wouldn't think of asking—"

"No," he replied pleasantly, as she mumbled to a halt.

He meant he took no offense. Evidently

she was trying to say he could keep the room at the old price. When he had mounted to his own floor he was confronted by Polly Tuttle, all agiggle to tell him:

"Hear her trying to applesauce *you* about being such an old tenant that she'd let you stay! So's your old mandamus! Listen! I came home early, just as a plain-clothes dick was notifying her that the bird who came here again this afternoon is a snowbird—a known hophead—and that she was inviting trouble believing his dreams about bigger and better room rent. Guess she'd rather have a no-bird. Tee-hee!"

Bart hardly had time to gain the seclusion of his room to mull over this, when his landlady called him to the telephone. His astonishment went to unprecedented levels when he heard Booler's voice saying:

"Hello, Bart, I've had a job locating you. Say, if it isn't breaking in on some evening engagement, I wish you'd meet me at the Patroons Club in an hour. Got something to discuss. Nothing to prevent, is there?"

"No," answered Pyne, relieved that his boss had cast his question in a form which could be answered in the negative.

When he was ushered into Booler's presence in the lounge of the exclusive club, he faced a smiling boss. Booler waved him cordially to a ponderously overstuffed seat beside himself, and burst out:

"You sure 'no' your bad eggs, speaking of this afternoon. I got so anxious, I finally called up Vanderlyn's, knowing Keely trades with them as well as with us. I got an earful. Seems one of Van's traveling men was in when our friend breezed in to get a check cashed, and he tipped off his boss that this bozo wasn't Keely at all. Van got Youngstown on long distance and confirmed.

"Keely said this bird was an employee who had been given the air, and he had taken along a Keely check book and was hanging paper with any of the firms here who sell to Keely. He knew all our names, and none of us knew Keely by sight, so it was a cinch. He was cleaning up after bank-closing time, figuring some bank clerk might know the signature. He skipped while they were phoning. Scared, I guess. You sure had his number."

"No," admitted Bart. "I just carried out your orders."

"Have it your way—you saved me two centuries," grinned Booler. "That isn't why I asked you here. All afternoon I've been studying your crabbing at my comical ad campaign, and in the quiet, away from Pomeroy's gab, I saw you were right—on a lot of points, at least. He had no business letting me tell him his business. I told him so to-night; and he quit."

"No?" exclaimed Bart incredulously.

"Yes," Booler assured him. "He was just a yes-man, or he wouldn't have let me dictate. Now, you've shown so much sense to-day, I'm going to put you in charge of our advertising. I don't need an assistant to yes me—I know what I want. You admit you don't know a lot about advertising, so you're willing to learn. No objection?"

"No," gasped Pyne, trapped into that answer.

"Then you'll take it," concluded Booler. "Don't answer; don't say 'No' again, or I'll screech. I see through you, young fellow. You got tired of being a yes-man, and took a solemn vow to say no all day to-day.

"It did you good, and it did me some good. Now it's after business hours, so you don't have to keep it up, even on a bet. You're going in to dine with me, and I won't ask you, for fear you'll say no. We can talk things over."

An hour later Bart called up Doris, and said he was starting over to see her, as he had much to tell.

Doris promptly snapped: "No."

"I said no," she reminded him coldly, when he pushed his way into her presence a short time later, after making all speed to get there. "Didn't you understand me?"

"No," he laughed, masterfully taking her in his arms. "That is—well, a wise man once said: 'A woman's no doth oft mean yes.'"

THE END

The Reward

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

"FIVE thousand dollars!" Bill said it almost reverently. "If we had five thousand dollars we'd—we'd—" He was trying to sift out in his mind just which of many possible projects would be best to consider.

"We'd blow it all in within a week," I ended for him.

"We'd invest it," said Bill, doggedly.

"Well, there's no use fighting over it, because we haven't got the five thousand," I pointed out.

"I bet we could cop this five thousand," went on Bill.

He had always cherished the idea that he would make a first class detective, and the sight of the sign offering a reward of five thousand for the capture of the notorious Parsons murderer had stirred his ambitions anew.

"When they begin offering five thousand dollar rewards, it is a sign that the police are baffled," I reminded him.

"The police are easily baffled," said Bill, scornfully.

Bill and I, drifting about the country, had arrived in Torrington a week or so after the Parsons murder, when interest in the case was at fever heat. Everywhere we went, restaurant, park or lodging house, people were talking about it, and we quickly became interested.

In fact that was the reason we remained in Torrington, hoping to see the mystery solved. Ordinarily we never stayed in a place more than a week. We read columns about the case in the Torrington *Register*—how the mysterious stranger had slunk to the lonely farmhouse on the outskirts of the town in the dead of night, how he brutally slew the farmer and his three children, and how he quickly dropped out of sight, leaving absolutely no clew to his identity or his destination.

"It's an open and shut case," declared Bill. "All we have to do is to locate this mysterious stranger."

"That's all," I agreed, cheerfully. "But where'll we locate him? That's the part that's not open and shut?"

"Five thousand dollars," sighed Bill, dreamily. "Somebody is going to get it, why not us?"

Bill talked about the five thousand dollars for twenty-four hours, and then decided to take up the investigation in earnest. We set out for the Parsons house, the scene of the murders, with the determination of picking up the trail of the mysterious stranger there.

"We'll have him by the end of the week," declared Bill, confidently, as we strolled into the yard of the farmhouse. "The only thing that's worrying me now is that they will give us the check for five thousand on Saturday afternoon after the banks are closed, and we won't be able to cash it until Monday."

Bill's a regular optimist.

"Hey, you bums, what do you want here?" The gruff hail brought us to a dead stop half way up the path to the farmhouse.

Bill glared superciliously at the heavy, flat-footed individual who was sauntering down the path toward us.

"We're out to find the murderer," Bill announced briefly.

"You'll have plenty of company," remarked the heavy one cheerfully. "There's been fifty nuts here already this morning."

The announcement did not discourage Bill in the least.

"A lot of amateurs." He dismissed them with an idle wave of his hand.

"Who are you? Sherlock Holmes?" The heavy individual was frankly curious.

"When they ask for the name to write on the check for five thousand dollars will be sufficient time for us to tell who I am," replied Bill with dignity.

"If they wait until then, the five thousand, at six per cent, compounded annually, will have accumulated a lot of interest," was the sarcastic comment.

Bill did not deign to argue further, but resumed his march up the path.

"Say, where d'ye think you're going?" inquired the heavy one.

"We want to look over the scene of the crime," said Bill.

"Nobody can go into the house—that's orders." The officer's tone left no room for argument.

Bill is a hot-headed cuss. He angrily swung on his heel.

"Come on, Jim," he said sharply. "The devil with these fellows. We'll let 'em find the murderer themselves."

I followed him out to the road again.

"What was it the officer said when I told him we'd let them find the murderer themselves?" asked Bill curiously, as we paused at the gate.

"He just said 'Thanks,'" I reported, dryly.

I hoped that Bill's desire to be a detective had been squelched, but the lure of five thousand dollars was strong.

"The trouble with police officers," said Bill, as he leaned idly against the gate-post, "is that they try to be too direct in their methods. They don't use reasoning power. Now suppose you were the murderer, what would be your first impulse after you had left the house, where the bodies of your victims were lying?"

"To get as far away in as short a time as I could," I replied promptly.

"That's it, absolutely," declared Bill, triumphantly. "That would be your first impulse. You would start walking as rapidly as you could, following the road perhaps, and taking to the bushes every time anybody hove in sight. As you walked you would reason the thing out. If you could find a haven for a month or so, you could then resume your flight with lessened danger of capture. Within twelve hours after the murders were discovered you would have to be in that haven. What, then, would be the logical thing for you to do in selecting that haven?"

"Find a place where they didn't read newspapers and where they were so isolated that they wouldn't be apt to hear about the murders," I ventured.

"Absolutely," agreed Bill, complacently. "All we have to do, then, is to find an isolated house within a day's walking distance from here. The murderer would have to walk every step of the way. He would not dare ask a ride from any passer-by."

"Marvelous, Holmes," I interposed. "The mystery is solved already. To locate

the place which you have described would be no more difficult than finding a needle in a haystack."

Bill ignored the sarcasm. "Somewhere about the premises, the murderer would be concealed. He might even be working as a farmhand, though more likely he would be under cover, foraging at night."

"Strange nobody reasoned this out before," I remarked.

"Just a matter of ordinary intelligence," said Bill, cheerfully. "The first question is: which way would the murderer head?"

"Along the road," I ventured.

"There's where you're wrong," replied Bill. "He wouldn't want to risk being seen in the vicinity of the house. He would be more likely to strike out across country and trust to luck that eventually he would arrive at another road. This section of New England is interlined with roads, so he would not be placing a very heavy burden on the shoulders of Lady Luck."

If Bill would only devote his intelligence to earning a living, he might be residing in a mansion.

"You're doing fine," I observed encouragingly.

Bill puffed out his chest.

"Just a matter of simple reasoning," he said. "Now, you remember the *Register* said that the murderer's tracks were traced to the edge of the road. The officers, of course, immediately split into two parties. One headed up the road and the other down. Nobody thought of crossing the road."

Bill looked contemptuously toward the house, but the heavy individual had disappeared from view.

"The murderer's impulse upon traversing the length of the path, would be to continue straight ahead. He wouldn't be apt to retrace his steps and waste that much time," continued Bill. "He—"

"Say, Bill, did you ever commit any murders?" I interrupted. It seemed to me that he had an ungodly lot of inside dope.

Bill dismissed the interruption scornfully.

"Plain, simple reasoning, that's all," he said.

He led the way across the road, and we plunged into the brush.

"He would keep blindly going ahead for the first fifteen or twenty minutes," panted Bill. "Then probably he would stop to take his bearings."

Bill kept moving ahead, and believe me, it was no easy going. Finally he stopped, and for fifteen minutes circled about within a wide radius. Suddenly he gave an exclamation of triumph.

"Look here, Jim!" he ejaculated. He was pointing excitedly to the ground. "See that broken stick and that footprint."

I tried not to laugh.

"There's not many sticks within a radius of half a mile of this place that aren't broken since you began this search," I reminded him.

"I didn't break this one," said Bill shortly. "I've been careful not to double on my tracks. Look!"

He slowly pushed his way through, pointing now and again to broken twigs.

"Somebody certainly has been through here," I conceded finally. "Perhaps it was an officer."

"An officer, huh!" Bill didn't consider the point worthy of consideration, much less of argument.

For several hours we followed the trail, losing it now and again, but always picking it up. The fugitive apparently had thrown caution to the winds upon reaching this point, and had devoted all his attention to pushing ahead. Finally the trail came to an end at the edge of a wood road.

"Here's the road he was looking for," exclaimed Bill, triumphantly. "The question now is, which way did he head?"

"I give it up," I admitted.

"We'll put ourselves in his place again," suggested Bill. "Suppose we had been walking across country and came to a road like this, which way would we head?"

"It would be a toss-up with me," I said.

"But here's a man who is desperately fleeing from capture. A misstep might mean death. He would—"

"There's a house over that way," I interrupted, pointing to a thin column of blue smoke ascending skyward from beyond a ridge.

"Either a house or a camping place." Bill was as excited as a ten-year-old kid

opening a bulky bundle on Christmas Day.

He headed down the road and climbed the ridge. From that vantage point we could see a rude, unpainted shanty partly concealed among the trees. Except for the smoke ascending from the chimney, there were no signs of life about the place.

"Five thousand dollars!" murmured Bill, as we descended the side of the ridge toward the shanty. "It's the easiest money we ever earned."

"We haven't got it yet," I reminded him.

"It just goes to show that brains and intelligence are the big things," said Bill. "We'll have the check before Saturday. Strange that nobody thought of following this trail."

We reached the edge of the clearing in front of the shanty when Bill and I joined in an ejaculation of surprise.

A tall, gaunt stranger, wearing khaki shirt and faded blue overalls, had stepped suddenly from behind the bushes. He surveyed us with a sardonic grin.

Bill's lips were trembling with eager questions, but before he had a chance to utter them, the gaunt stranger started speaking.

"Yes, I live here; no, I ain't seen no suspicious stranger coming this way in the past four or five weeks; no, I ain't got no new farmhand 'cause I do all my own work; no, I ain't read nothin' about the Parsons murders, and I don't reckon I care to. Anything else you want to know?"

Bill and I gasped. All our questions had been answered before we had a chance to ask a single one.

"How—what—" stammered Bill.

"I reckoned you was another pair of investigators," explained the farmer. "There's been a hundred here in the past six weeks and they all ask the same questions. There's another coming now."

He pointed a gnarled finger toward the ridge over which Bill and I had just climbed. A lone figure, moving rapidly, had hove into view.

"You might tell him to turn back; this ground has been thoroughly covered," remarked the farmer. "The police came first, and then—"

"The police came first?" echoed Bill incredulously. He vainly sought to conceal his chagrin.

We thanked the farmer and sheepishly headed back toward the ridge.

"Don't forget to tell that idiot coming that I can't give him any information," the farmer called after us.

"Well, there's one thing, you won't have to worry about where to cash that check for five thousand," I remarked cheerfully to Bill.

But Bill did not hear me. He was pointing in amazement toward the figure which a moment before had been descending the hill. The figure—that of a man—had turned and was in full flight up the hill.

"Come on," Bill gave my sleeve a tug, and started in pursuit. We aren't athletes, but the thought of winning five thousand dollars spurred us to terrific effort.

We were gaining slowly on the fugitive, who apparently was pretty well tired out before he started to run. We were within twenty feet of him when he plunged from the road into the bushes.

"He may be armed, look out," I panted to Bill, but Bill was like a wild man. Totally oblivious of danger, he plunged into the bushes after his quarry.

"I surrender! I surrender!"

The voice was almost pleading. Two minutes later Bill emerged from the bushes, one hand tightly clutching the wrist of the fugitive. The latter, unshaven and unkempt, with his clothes torn, looked every inch a criminal.

"Five thousand," sighed Bill happily. "Earned through reason and intelligence."

"Through bull luck, I'd say," was my observation.

We trudged along the road, our prisoner between us.

"Do you admit your guilt?" Bill inquired curiously.

"Yes." The prisoner's air was resigned. "I knew a week ago that I never could get away. These woods are full of detectives. They'd hound a man till he dropped dead."

"They ought to," was Bill's grim comment.

He could scarcely conceal his elation.

For myself I felt like bursting into song. Five thousand dollars! From now on, Bill and I would be on Easy Street. I hoped that Bill would show judgment in selecting our car. It doesn't pay to buy a cheap machine.

"This road ought to lead to some place," remarked Bill, after we had been trudging along for an hour or so.

"You certainly picked a wild section to hide in," he added admiringly, directing the remark to our prisoner. The latter merely shrugged his shoulders in discouragement.

Suddenly a car appeared around a bend in the road. An officer in uniform was at the wheel.

"Another officer," groaned our prisoner.

"We got him! We got him!" Bill shouted excitedly in the general direction of the car.

The police officer had sighted us and slowed up.

"Good work," was his laconic comment. "Who are you fellows?" He looked at us curiously.

"Private detectives," said Bill, modestly trying to hide his importance.

"Private detectives, eh? Out for the reward?" The officer's tone didn't seem quite so cordial.

"You bet we're after the reward," Bill doesn't believe in beating around the bush.

"We'd traced him up here," the officer nodded toward our prisoner. "I'd have had him in five minutes."

"We got him first," said Bill doggedly.

"Oh, well, you can have it all," rejoined the officer good-naturedly. "It's nothing but chicken feed."

"Chicken feed," said Bill. "What would you officers call a regular reward?"

"Five thousand," was the prompt reply. "Our men nabbed the Parsons' murderer this afternoon. We found him hiding in a cave back of the house. He hadn't even left the premises after the murders. He had a month's supply of food and water stored in the cave. We reasoned from the start that he hadn't gone far, and it proved good reasoning."

He glanced toward our prisoner again. "The rewards for these army deserters are only twenty-five dollars."

Neither Bill nor I replied. We were occupied in readjusting our ideas from the five thousand to the twenty-five dollar scale.

THE END

A GREAT SERVICE

I THINK about the things we did,
The places that we went,
The folks we knew, the good old days,
The money that we spent—
I think about the fights we had,
And 'bout the making-ups,
Remember Skinner's sorrel colt
And good old Queenie's pups?

I think about the old mill bridge,
That had the rotten floor,
I think about that haunted house
With symbols on the door—
I think about that warm June night,
You came in my hour of need
And eloped with the girl I nearly wed,
Ah! You were a friend indeed!

Peter A. Lea.

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

IN the letter from H. K. M., of Denton, Texas, printed below, you will notice he says that he started reading ARGOSY because he saw a story in it by Kenneth Perkins. It would be interesting, the editor thinks, to learn how others in our great big circle of ARGOSY constituency came to enroll themselves among its purchasers each week. Was it a cover picture that attracted them, the name of an author, some striking title to a story or the word of a friend who was already an ARGOSY fan? "The Mesa" ran from May 15 to June 12, 1926. The new Seltzer serial starts in a few weeks now.

DENTON, TEXAS.

I have been reading the Reader's Viewpoint and find that many readers favor the discontinuance of Western stories. I say keep them going. They are the only stories I ever read, but I can tolerate the others, if you will publish at least one Western story in each issue.

I have only been reading ARGOSY for a few weeks. I started it because I saw a story in it by Kenneth Perkins. I just finished it, and I haven't read a better story in many months. I have not yet subscribed for ARGOSY, but I surely would if I knew you would keep up the Western stories. One of your readers said that all Western stories were the same old bunk. I agree that many of them are, but not the stories by Kenneth Perkins, Charles Alden Seltzer, and Max Brand. Please omit the detective stories. Put them in *Flynn's Weekly*. What are the dates of the ARGOSY issues in which "The Mesa," by Charles Alden Seltzer, was printed? H. K. M.

TULLOS, LA.

I want to add my more or less feeble voice to the chorus of knocks and praises you are getting. I have not missed a copy of the ARGOSY for eight years, and I read all the stories. Some are better—much better—than others, but mostly they are exceptionally good. Am especially fond of the imaginative stories by Cummings, Burroughs, and a few others, so long as they don't plagiarize H. G. Wells, as some have done.

A few Westerns are all right, but not too many, as I get a magazine every week which has nothing else, and too much is plenty. "The Town That Believed in Santa Claus," by A. T. Locke, was positively the best Christmas story I ever read. Have read about all the magazines printed in America, but ARGOSY is my favorite by long odds. E. A. G.

FRANKFORT, SO. DAK.

I am an interested reader of the ARGOSY; have been for four years, and am now getting a hand in the argument on Western stories. I like your Western stories, and have just finished "Desert Magic." Who says Perkins isn't original? I've read Western stories all my life and never found one like it. It was a fine story. These Easterners growling that the gun-fighting yarns belong in the dead past are off their track. Our Black Hills and South Dakota badlands are still wild and woolly, and I've personal acquaintance with a family that got chased out of the Black Hills at the wrong end of a gun. Two of the sons were wounded. This happened last summer, so let me tell my Eastern friends not to give up their hopes yet of a romantic West.

Give us some more stories like "Silent Jerry" and "The Devil's Saddle," C. N.

WRAY, COLO.

Have been reading the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY magazine for some time, and will say I like good Western stories and others like "On To Florida," "Moonglow," *et cetera*, but I don't like stories like "The Future Eve." But the magazine is all right as it is; you can't please every one. C. C. H.

SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

Regarding whether or not to print more Western stories, my advice is to print ones which are true to type; that is, keep them from shooting everything in sight, and using that sort of speech which the authors—who probably have never been farther West than Hoboken—think is Western. The next main fault I find is using the same words over and over again. Kenneth Perkins, for instance, uses the same words; hellbender, mucker, *et cetera*, so often that it takes away any pleasure that one might possibly have in his inane, monotonous stories. He never stops to change the scene of his stories, and now every time I see Soda Mesa, *et cetera*, I feel like busting loose and tossing your magazine into the bay.

I. T. P., JR.

P. S.—What happened to the boy who wrote those snappy little stories of Vingo, Florida?

P. P. S.—You probably won't print this letter, but I have at least had the pleasure of expressing my feelings.

—

We have two Vingo stories in stock, which will appear in due course.

OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA.

I would like to accept the invitation to ARGOSY readers to express their views on the character of stories appearing in your magazine. I have been an ARGOSY reader for many years and what makes

your magazine one of the best on the market is the clean, wholesome character of the stories printed. The great popularity of the ARGOSY proves that the general public enjoys stories that are true to life and are expressed in such language that they may be read by every member of the family without hurt or affront to any one.

If I were to offer a criticism I would say that such stories as "Moon Men" or "The Future Eve"—now running—are too improbable to be either educative or very entertaining. However, I realize that it is impossible to select stories that would please all of your great army of readers. So I would say: "Just keep on as you have been doing." Give us clean, wholesome stories dealing with problems of real life and we will all be satisfied. D. C. R.

LAKE GEORGE, N. Y.

I really do not care for Western stories; we have had too many. Have read all of John Wilstach's stories. Just finished "When Do We Eat?" which has the novelty of all this writer's tales. He uses such different subjects. MRS. P. M. M.

CHICAGO, ILL.

Have been reading with much interest The Reader's Viewpoint, and in the issue of November 27, a reader states she—I know it's "she"—does not like stories told in the first person, and I am so afraid Mme. Storey narratives will suffer in consequence that I must let you know my opinion. As a rule, I do not care for stories told in the first person. I cannot tell why, unless it is because they give the impression of egoism, but Mme. Storey are the best you publish, or among the best. I look forward to a story by Footner, because they are always good. One knows what to expect. I like Edgar Franklin stories on that order. "The Endless Chain," "The Call of Shining Steel," *et cetera*. Not so fond of the general run of Westerns; I suppose the men like Western stories better than women, anyway. My husband and I have been reading ARGOSY for five years, and I think all your stories are good, clean, worth while literature.

Contrary to most, I did not care for "You're Under Arrest." It was too far-fetched to be good reading to my way of thinking. A different story once in awhile is all right, but not for a steady diet. "The Seal of Satan" was real good, a little original to most of them. MRS. J. J. F.

P. S.—I also enjoy serials written by J. U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith, even if they do "thee and thou." Please do not forget Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.

UTICA, N. Y.

In regard to the story "Moonglow" I will say that it is very interesting, from start to finish. The author did not give his plot away as so many of them do nowadays; the consequence was that he kept his readers' attention to the very last. In some cases, I suppose, people try to figure out the ending for themselves, as I did—but I failed entirely on this one.

In regard to your question about more or less Westerns I would say leave the ARGOSY as it is. Personally, I am fond of Western stories, but I like mystery and romance equally well. Your magazine is the best and cheapest one I know. It carries reading that is sometimes educational and sometimes just ordinary time-passing stories. MRS. J. W. S.

KNOXVILLE, TENN.

And now concerning a story of much interest to the ARGOSY fans, a story which aroused no little comment: "The Return," by Katharine Haviland Taylor. This story was published April 10, 1926, as a so-called "different" tale, but in my opinion it was not spooky; unconvincing, punk, silly, and a few other things. The "different" stories have been without fail accepted by the readers with tremendous applause, and as a few outstanding and always remembered examples I will name three real different tales, which are: "The Moon Maid," "The Time Machine," and "The Ship of Ishtar," all rather different in theme. I like especially tales of trips to other planets, and of late only one has been published, entitled "The Radio Planet."

This type of story, which stimulates the imagination, has been seemingly discarded for Western tales—tales of two-gunmen and the great open spaces, where men *are* men. Western tales. I wish that such stories could be utterly dispensed with, for they are all alike and there are only about thirty other magazines devoted to this type of tale. There have been far too many Westerns published lately, and in place of them should be placed the tales of business, adventure, love—very little—and the *different* kind.

The fans of the ARGOSY want variety. In fact, I know of three different friends of mine who ceased to take it because they declared that the Westerns predominated. So my war cry is: "No Western stories at all." Rather give us improbable tales. F. W. F., JR.

STUTTGART, ARK.

I have been a steady reader of ARGOSY for over twenty years, buying at the stand. I have greatly appreciated its steadfast adherence to reputable literature. I spent considerable of my young manhood in the West. Perhaps for this reason I like the most of my fiction to be Western stories. However, I have been in the Southland these past twenty-five years.

"Moonglow" is a great disappointment, a splendid writer, with a jumble of sky-high dreams and very few facts. It is in no sense any sort of reflection of the present South.

The first half of "The Great Mistake" is fine—the last half is the worst conclusion I ever read.

"The Shanghai Jester" is clear-cut animalism in a disgusting guise. Some of you are slipping. T. M. H.

When an American girl is held for ransom by a Cuban sea bandit,—WOW—things begin to happen!

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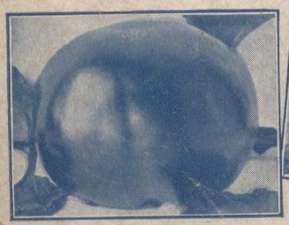

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